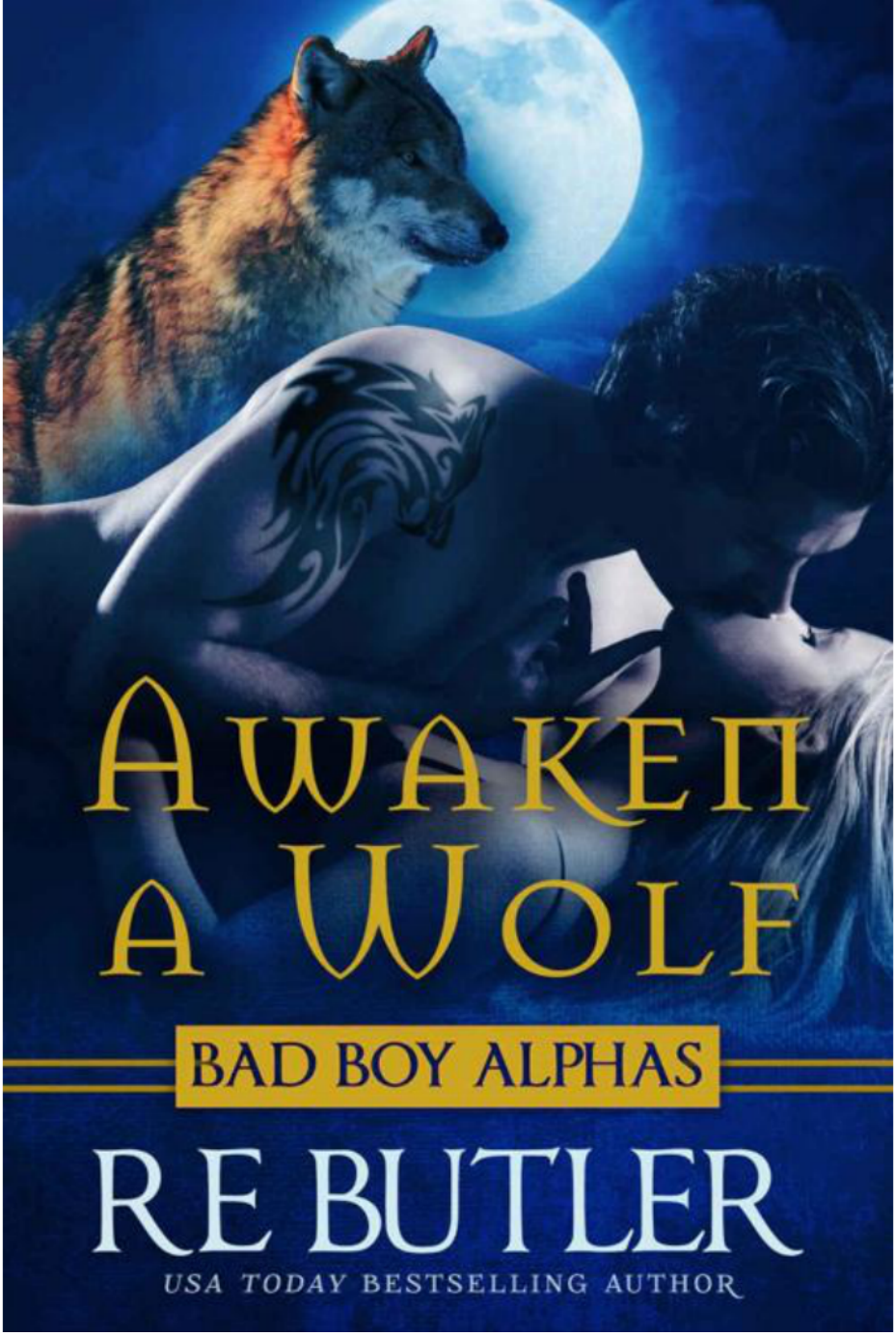

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Chapter 1

Cinder Knight leaned over the small mortar and pestle and gave the mixture another few turns, making sure the tiny seeds were finely ground. After tapping the pestle lightly on the edge of the stone bowl, she set it on the counter next to her and carefully tipped the contents onto a square of wax paper and then folded the paper into a small packet, sealing it with tape.

She straightened and arched her back, stretching with a grimace. She'd been bent over the bowl for forty-five minutes grinding four different seeds into a fine powder for use in a curative spell. She carried the packet out of the room and down the hall, entering an office where Lorene, the owner of the Cleveland Mother Earth Store and powerful North Corner of the coven, sat.

"Are you done already?" Lorene asked from behind her desk, looking up as Cinder strode in.

"Those seeds didn't stand a chance," Cinder said, smiling.

She handed the packet to Lorene, who brought it under her nose and inhaled with a smile. "You are so talented. I dare say I could make a fortune for the coven just on your potions alone."

Cinder beamed with pride. She'd been with the Northern Ohio Wiccan coven for four months, joining after her mom's coven suggested that she find herself another coven to hook up with after the truth of her half-nature had surfaced. Cinder wasn't a full Wiccan — her mom was a natural, full Wiccan, but her father was a werewolf, and that meant that although she was as powerful as any natural Wiccan, Cinder was an outsider. Not enough Wiccan to be a corner and not enough werewolf to shift. She had feet in two vastly different worlds.

Lorene glanced at the old-fashioned grandfather clock in the corner of

her office. “I suppose you have plans with your handsome roommate?” she asked with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

“Cyrus has to work. The construction company is doing inventory this weekend, so he’s staying in Whisper Creek. I’m going out with Leo, though. He’s taking me to Lykos.”

“Ah, I remember when that club opened. It was the first of its kind in the area — a place for supernatural creatures to hang out together in neutral territory.”

Lykos was owed by Leo’s wolf pack, but every shifter group in the area was welcome there as long as they didn’t cause trouble. Cleveland, Ohio was a virtual melting pot of supernatural creatures. Aside from the Wiccan coven and wolf pack, there were dragons, vampires, bears, falcons, white lions, and tigers in the area. Somehow they all managed to get along.

During the solstice and full moon ceremonies, when the Wiccans would gather on the bluffs near Lake Erie and cast spells, each supernatural group sent guards to watch over them. During her first full moon with the coven, she met Cyrus, a tiger shifter, and they hit it off right away. Later on, she met Leo when he guarded her. She lived with Cyrus and dated Leo, but they were both casual relationships. She wasn’t the mate to either male, but she cared for them both a great deal.

“Well, I won’t keep you from your date.”

“It’s not a date.”

Lorene rolled her eyes. “You sound like my granddaughter.”

“Elizabeth?”

She nodded with a smile. “She used to play the field with a number of suitors, keeping them all at arm’s length, happy to be casual with them. Eventually, fate took her life in a different direction.”

“Two bears, right? Twins?”

“Yes. She’s never been happier, but for a while, I thought she’d never settle down.”

“I guess you can’t play the field forever, but I’m having fun.”

“You’re young.”

Cinder was nineteen plus one, which according to her supernaturally gifted *long-life* meant that once she reached eighteen, her body began to age one year for every twelve that passed. She was technically thirty-one.

Lorene put the packet down on her desk and said, “Have a nice weekend, honey.”

“Thanks, you too.”

Cinder gathered her belongings from her locker in the lunchroom and ducked out the back entrance to where her car was parked. She sat behind the wheel of her Eclipse and started the engine, poking around on the GPS screen until she found a satellite radio station she liked, and then she headed home.

She shared a two-bedroom apartment with Cyrus. With him gone for the weekend, she had the place to herself and decided that after she and Leo had partied the night away, she’d invite him to spend the weekend.

Once home, she kicked off her shoes and checked her phone, answering a text from Leo that said he’d arrive at seven. She had just enough time to grab a quick bite and clean up, since she could still smell the crushed seeds on her skin.

Cyrus had a flair for cooking, although he liked to pretend he was too alpha male to spend time in the kitchen. She wasn’t surprised to see a note on the counter directing her to a covered plate in the microwave, half of whatever he’d made for himself for dinner before heading to Whisper Creek. Opening the microwave, she hummed in surprise to see a breaded pork chop and sweet potato fries. After pressing the reheat button, she walked to her bedroom, stripping off her clothes along the way. There was only one bathroom in the apartment, but their schedules were different and they rarely had to fight for the room.

An hour later, there were two sharp knocks on the front door before it swung open and Leo’s voice rang out. “Hey, Cin.”

“I’m back here,” she called, pulling the black corset up over her hips and adjusting it over her breasts.

“Nice,” Leo said with a sexy drawl. “How about you push that back down and we stay in?”

She grinned as she turned. “Tie me up?”

“Oh, baby, I love your double entendres,” he said, chuckling as he strode to her and tightened the strings that pulled the corset tight to her body.

“We can stay in *after* we go out.” She turned to face him after he finished tightening her top.

“Yeah?”

“I’m off until Monday night.”

His brow arched. “What about cranky cat?”

She swatted his shoulder. “He’s in WC for the weekend.”

He growled playfully, his brown eyes dancing. “Ready to go to Lykos?”

Leo was a total sweetheart, handsome, and leanly muscled. “You bet,” she said, grabbing her clutch.

She locked the front door and took Leo’s hand as they walked down the flight of stairs to the parking lot. He opened the passenger door for her and shut her in safely before jogging around the front and opening his own door. As he sat down and turned on the engine, they played the cursory Twenty Questions about their respective jobs. Leo worked for his alpha, Adam, at the pack-owned garage in Delta Park, outside of Cleveland, where the pack lived. Aside from working for the coven on Thursdays and Fridays, she was also a receptionist at the Whalen Family Clinic, which catered to supernatural creatures, Monday through Wednesday.

She stroked her fingers through the hair on the back of Leo’s head, and he made a low growling sound. “If you start kicking your leg, I’m going to bust a gut laughing.”

He grinned. “I can’t help if it you always find my happy place.”

He pulled into a parking spot in front of Lykos. The name of the club was written in crimson lights, glowing brightly against the darkness. There was a line of people leading out the door, which she had expected because it was Friday night and there weren’t a whole lot of shifter-friendly clubs in Cleveland. Leo held her hand as they walked past the crowd waiting to get in. The bouncers were two males she recognized as being coven guards at one time or another. They smiled at her, and she smiled back before Leo tugged her through the open front door.

He pulled open a second set of doors, and music blasted her, making her wince as she adjusted to the deafening sound.

“How do you guys stand the loud music?”

Full wolves like Leo had very sensitive hearing. Her hearing was slightly better than a human because she was part wolf but she knew her hearing wasn’t as good as Leo’s.

“You get used to it,” he said loudly.

They wove through the crowd that stood around the dance floor. Strobe lights and brightly colored lasers decorated the walls, floors,

and writhing bodies. Leo stopped at the edge of the dance floor and said, “Drink or dance?”

“Dance!” She whooped as she tugged him into the crowd and they began to dance. She lost herself in the music, in the sights and sounds and smells of the club, and let her mind drift away to that place where everything was amazing. In this place, she was just a girl dancing with her friend. She wasn’t a half-Wiccan, half-wolf trying to find out where she fit in. She wasn’t the girl whose father wanted nothing to do with her, or whose mom hadn’t been willing to leave the coven with Cinder or fight for her right to stay. No – here, in this club, she was just a girl, and that was more than okay with her.

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Chapter 2

"An alpha can't be an island, son. You have to take a mate," Craig Beaumont, Adam's father, said as they sat in Adam's office.

Adam exhaled sharply, trying not to growl. "I'm not just going to randomly pick a female from the pack and mate her." In truth, he fucked one of the females every full moon. It was part of par for being a wolf — the need to fuck and shift and hunt, to give into the primal urges that they kept under wraps the other days of the month. There were only ten single females he wasn't related to in the pack, and they serviced all of the unmated males as well, more than forty now. It wasn't a pretty job, but the females knew what it meant to be a wolf, and in their culture, females were sex objects or they were mates. There was no in-between.

"You don't want a she-wolf, that's fine. You should reach out to the coven. We are in need of a new witch for our full moon ceremonies. We haven't communed with our spirit ancestors since Lit left."

He growled under his breath. The last time he tangled with a witch, she'd twisted his heart out and stomped on it, as if he had no value. He had pretended as if it hadn't mattered at the time, but it had mattered a great deal. He hadn't loved Elizabeth, but he could have, if she'd just opened up that part of herself. But she was content to keep him and a handful of others on the leash for full-moon sex. There was a part of him that understood it. She was young; she liked her freedom. But there was only so much that a man could take and still keep his dignity.

"I don't think I can take a witch, Dad," he said finally.

"You need to do something. The females are restless because they have no one to lead them. Your mother is doing what she can, but she's not the alpha's mate."

After their conversation, his father had left him alone to think and that was why he'd ended up at Lykos that night, thinking about females and mating. The circular booth that was reserved for Adam and whoever he wanted to join him was currently filled with his

closest friends and packmates, Brick, Solan, and Joe. They knew he wasn't in the mood to chat, so they kept the drinks coming and the conversation to a minimum.

He looked across the crowded club with a lack of enthusiasm. Same old club, same old music, same old females looking for love, or a lay, or both. If the situation were different for him, if he weren't alpha of the Delta Park pack, maybe he could grab one or two of the scantily clad females and take them in one of the back rooms for a little fun. But that didn't appeal to him anymore, not really. Approaching his true age of twenty, which meant that at wolves' slow aging of one body year for every twelve years that passed, he was now closer to middle age even though he still looked like a college kid. He didn't feel like a college kid, though. Disillusionment colored his perception now.

Being alpha was a brutal business. He'd been third in command before Lit, their former alpha, had started to slip in his duties to the pack. He had family troubles that included a wild teenage daughter and an unnatural witch wife who had friendships with some extremely unsavory males. To prevent the pack from disintegrating, Adam overstepped their beta, Brick, challenged Lit, and won. Lit and his family left town to join another pack somewhere away from their problems, and Adam hoped the problems hadn't followed them there. Adam became alpha, keeping his cousin Brick as his second. Adam's parents were elders of the pack, ones who had been around for a long time and wanted to share their wisdom with the pups. They helped the pack without getting caught up in rank fights, with this lifestyle becoming a form of retirement for wolves.

Adam's only sister, Angie, was eighteen plus five, just old enough to think she knew everything when she'd hardly lived her life yet. Just as he was about to give up and head home for a date with his right hand and some serious shut-eye, he caught the sweet scent of pure sugar. His body tightened and froze. His wolf rose inside him until he felt his fangs pushing out of his gums. Closing his eyes, he scented further until he located its source. When his eyes opened, he saw the object of his desire — a petite blonde wearing a black corset and a very short skirt.

He had only one thought as he prepared to rush to her side: to throw her over his shoulder, take her home, mark her, and make her his forever. There would be time for talk later, much later, after he fucked her soundly.

As he stood, he saw an arm slide around her shoulders and tug her forward. A head lowered and dropped a kiss to her mouth. His

hackles rose immediately. Someone was touching his woman.

Then he grinned when he saw who was touching her: Leo, one of his lowest-ranked wolves. Sitting down, he nudged Brick and said, “Go tell Leo that I need to talk to him now.”

Adam leaned back against the cushioned seat and smirked, making plans to learn all about his woman from Leo before asserting himself as alpha and forbidding Leo from seeing her again.

It was good to be the king.

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Chapter 3

Cinder checked her cell again, for the tenth time in as many minutes. She just didn't understand what had happened to Leo Friday night. After they'd danced and rubbed obscenely against each other, teasing with low voices about what they were going to do to each other later, they'd headed to the bar to cool down. Someone from his pack had pulled him away, and when he returned, he had taken her home immediately. All teasing was gone; his face that normally always had a big smile just for her had gone very serious. For the first time since they'd met, he kissed her cheek and left her at her front door.

Three days later, he still hadn't returned any of her calls. She didn't think he had found someone else. They were close enough that he would have felt comfortable telling her he was ready to drop the sex from their friendship and move on. She could handle that. She loved him, but she wasn't *in love* with him. But this was a new and unsettling development.

She leaned back in the navy-blue office chair at the Whalen Family Clinic's reception desk. The clinic was located just outside downtown Cleveland where she worked three days a week in the early evenings. Because she was a hybrid, she was comfortable around shifters, and they were comfortable around her. If she were completely human, they wouldn't necessarily trust her when they were weakened with injury or illness.

Her phone buzzed, and she answered it without looking at the display. "Leo?"

Cyrus chuckled. "Sorry, Cinder, it's just me."

"Oh, hey, C. What's up?"

"Just checking on you. Your pup hasn't called yet?"

Leo was considered a "pup" because he was eighteen plus two.

"No," she said and sighed.

The clinic was dead. Dr. Whalen, who had created the clinic when his

wife had died of serious injuries sustained in a rank fight and no human doctors would help her, had been in his office all day, with the door locked and strict orders that he was not to be disturbed.

"I'm okay," she promised, but she didn't feel okay. She felt abandoned, and she hadn't really felt that way since her father had come to see her on her eighteenth birthday. He had been non-existent her entire life until that moment, and he had taken one look at her, declared her a witch and her mom's problem, and disappeared again.

"No, you're not. I'll pick you up after work and we'll go out."

"I don't really feel like doing anything."

"Whatever. We'll grab a bite and go for a walk. It's not up for debate, Cin. I'll be there at eight."

Cyrus hung up before she could say anything else. She put the phone back on the desk and turned to the stack of filing she'd ignored in favor of mulling over Leo's behavior. Cyrus was right. What she needed was to get her head out of her ass and get back to her life. Leo was fine, she was certain, and whatever was keeping him from the phone was most likely pack-related and, therefore, the be-all and end-all of his existence. Wolves were very loyal to their packs, to the extent of ignoring all else. If she was actually dating him and he ignored her so thoroughly, she'd be pissed. Since their relationship was casual, she really had no right to be angry with him.

The hour hand swung around the clock several more times, and she shut down the computer for the night and grabbed her purse, ready to go out with Cyrus as soon as he arrived. The clinic was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, but only ran a skeleton crew overnight for emergencies and any patients who might be staying long-term. She heard the familiar rumble of Cyrus's Dodge Ram just as the desk phone buzzed. The display read Dr. Whalen's extension.

"Yes, sir?" she answered, keeping an eye on the front door.

"Cinder, would you come to my office please?"

She glanced toward the front doors and considered telling Dr. Whalen that it was time for her to go. Instead, she said, "Right away, sir."

She dropped her purse on the desk and walked quickly back toward his office, down the long, sterile white-tiled hallway, with pastel walls dotted with watercolor prints. His door was open, and she smoothed her hands down the front of her knee-length skirt. She was suddenly very nervous, and she didn't know why.

Pushing the door all the way open, she stepped inside and came face-to-face with a room full of men. The scent of wolf was overwhelming

in the room. Images flashed through her mind of deep woods and moonlit nights. She felt that primal part of herself stand up and pay attention. Her gaze roamed quickly over the men, but she didn't recognize anyone.

Dr. Whalen, who sat behind his oversize mahogany desk, cleared his throat. "Cinder, I'd like to introduce you to my alpha, Adam Beaumont."

He gestured toward one of the men who sat in a leather chair across from the desk. Adam stood slowly, gracefully unfolding his tall body. Dark slacks encased long legs and lean hips, and a black, fitted tee hugged clearly defined muscles. The hint of a tattoo peeked out from the edge of one sleeve. Tousled coal black hair looked deliciously just-rolled-out-of-bed, and ice blue eyes sliced through her like a laser beam, while her eyes stopped dead on the most perfectly shaped mouth she'd ever seen. Lickable. Kissable.

Her heart pounded loudly in her chest, a frantic rhythm not born of fear or worry but of good old-fashioned lust; the part of herself that she'd always considered so small — that wolfy, primal part — suddenly loomed inside her, filling the corners of her mind with dark and wicked whispers.

Her hand clenched on the doorknob and the lock clicked, startling her from her embarrassing fascination with Adam's mouth. She cleared her throat and said, "It's nice to meet you, Adam."

She wasn't sure why Dr. Whalen wanted her to meet his alpha, or why they had spent the entire day locked in his office. In all the months she'd worked for Dr. Whalen, she'd never seen a serious meeting occur in the clinic.

Adam reached for her hand and clasped it firmly, lifting it to his mouth to kiss the top. Tingles raced along her skin as his lips met her hand, and a swell of passion flared inside her at the small touch. Her breasts grew heavy, her sex flooded, and her lips parted as she panted for breath. A bewildering mixture of images flashed through her mind as his ice blue eyes locked onto hers — their naked bodies pressed together tightly, skin glistening with sweat. His fangs sinking into her shoulder. Furry bodies cuddled close for warmth.

She could have drowned in the emotions that swamped her – lust, passion, and desire like she'd never known. She felt him pull her closer and she was helpless to stop him.

"Yo, Cin? You ready, baby?" Cyrus's deep voice called from down the hallway, and the spell was broken between her and the alpha wolf. She jerked her hand from his grasp and stepped back.

Clasping her trembling hands together, she avoided Adam's gaze as she said to Dr. Whalen, "I have a date. If there's nothing else, my shift is over and I'd like to leave."

"Have a nice evening," Adam said, and his words sounded more like an order than a nice suggestion.

She nodded stiffly and hurried out the door. She could still smell the scent of wolves, and she glanced behind her and saw that Adam was watching intently from the doorway. Ignoring the suddenly strong desire to go back to him, she muttered, "Fucking wolves," under her breath and stormed into the reception area.

Cyrus was waiting patiently, leaning against the counter. He was smiling until she drew closer and then he frowned. "What's wrong?"

She grabbed her purse from the desk and pushed open the front door. He followed close behind and opened the passenger door of his truck for her. A twist of her gut sent her to her knees as she gasped and pressed her hands to her belly. Her purse bounced on the sidewalk, the contents spilling as it tipped to the side.

"Whoa, you need to go back inside and see the doc?"

"No!" she yelled and then groaned as she tried to straighten but was unable to stand from a crouch. Her stomach felt wound tight as if she were hovering on the edge of an orgasm. Cyrus knelt in front of her.

"You're acting kinda weird. Are you coming into heat again?" He tipped her chin until she was looking at him.

She shivered as his fingers touched her, and a sudden revulsion flitted through her. She pushed his hands away.

"No, that's only twice a year, and I never had one hit so hard like it did a few weeks ago." She felt another twist to her gut and took in a slow breath. As a partial wolf, she went through a spring and fall mating heat every year. "Do I smell like I'm coming into heat? There were wolves in the doc's office who were acting really strange. Staring at me. The alpha was there." She shook her head, closing her eyes at the mention of the alpha.

Cyrus pulled her close and buried his face in her neck. Her whole body lit up as if she'd touched an electric socket. That same revulsion speared through her at Cyrus's touch, but at the same time, she wanted to rub herself against him.

"Holy shit," he breathed the words, his fingers tangling in the ends of her hair and pulling slightly. "You smell incredible but not like you're in heat. Do you want to fuck?"

She shivered in his arms, an uncontrollable urge to have sex pushing to the forefront of her mind like a freight train. "Get me out of here."

"You got it," he said as he pulled her to her feet.

She stared up at him. He was her friend. Her roommate. The one man she'd trusted to take her through her heat-cycle in September. Suddenly, however…he seemed like a stranger. She was half aroused, half aggravated. She wanted someone to touch her, but not Cyrus. Never Cyrus again.

"Don't. Not you," she whispered.

"What?"

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the image of ice blue eyes from her mind.

"I don't know what's happening to me."

Cyrus growled abruptly and shoved her behind his back. The sudden movement caught her off guard, and she hit the edge of the open door with her shoulder and groaned at the sharp pain.

Cradling her shoulder, she looked around Cyrus to see what he was growling at and saw three males storming toward them. They were some of the wolves from Dr. Whalen's office. She wanted to go to them. These males, who she didn't know from anyone, suddenly seemed more important to her than her friend. Her wolf paced in her mind, the usually silent creature becoming more insistent that the wolves were the ones she needed to surround her.

She heard the soft sound of Cyrus's claws unsheathing from his fingertips, and a deep growl rumbled in his chest. "Cin? Get in the truck, and I'll get us home."

One of the males, who looked like he could be related to Adam, stopped a few yards from them and held out his hand. "Let me take you back inside, Cinder. The alpha is waiting."

Her wolf howled and tears pricked behind her eyes. She looked past the three males to see Adam standing behind the glass doors of the clinic, watching. Her arousal beat at her like a drum, the desire to see him up close was so strong that standing still was a study in determination. She could smell her own arousal. It was sweet and hot, like sunshine and sugar mixed together.

Cyrus snarled softly and spun, his eyes glowing with heat as he reached for her. One of the wolves grabbed Cyrus and jerked him away from her. The sudden movement made him reach out for her, and one of his claw-tipped hands wrapped around her upper arm. As

the wolf gave a second violent jerk on Cyrus's arm and his grip loosened, Cyrus's claws dug into her flesh and then raked across her arm. She screamed in pain as his claws ripped through her flesh.

Cyrus hadn't seemed aware that he'd hurt her as he spun on the male and attacked him. She opened her mouth to tell him to knock it off, but a wave of dizziness struck her, and she leaned heavily against the door of the truck. Her weight caused the door to close, and she lost her footing, landing heavily on her butt as her breath whooshed out in a pain-filled groan.

Cyrus and the wolf stopped throttling each other. Cyrus knelt next to her and so did Adam.

Where had he come from?

She blinked and her vision spun as tingles raced up her arm. Cyrus reached for her and Adam growled angrily. "Don't fucking touch her, cat."

Her hand went numb, and she felt the blood dripping down inside her silk blouse, with the tattered sleeve hanging in ribbons. "What are you doing here, Adam?" she asked, her head swimming.

He touched her arm gingerly. She tried to pull her arm out of his grip, but it was tingling too much, the numbness encompassing her entire arm. Without a word, he picked her up in his arms, and she didn't want to sigh in relief and settle against him, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

"Put her down, dog," Cyrus growled.

"I'm taking her back inside."

Her lips felt thick, her tongue swelling in her mouth as her eyes rolled back in her head. Adam cursed and began to run, shouting for someone to open the clinic doors.

Then there was nothing.

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Chapter 4

Adam had never known fear like he did as his mate's eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp in his arms. He barked at Solan to open the clinic doors as he raced toward the building, cradling her close and praying to the spirits of their ancestors that she would recover. He wanted to be pissed that she'd walked away with the tiger, because he knew her body was reacting to meeting him with a mild form of heat, but right now all he could think was that she might die. The sharp, metallic scent of her blood filled his nose.

Solan wrenched open the doors, and Adam raced inside, bellowing for Whalen.

"What happened?" Whalen asked as he met them in the hallway. Taking one look at her, he shouted, "This way!" and moved quickly down the hall.

Adam's heart leapt into his throat as he raced behind Whalen and into a patient room.

"Put her on the bed," Whalen said, pressing a button over the bed that made a sharp beeping sound out in the hallway.

"What's happening to her?" Adam demanded. He laid her gently on the bed, mindful of the gashes on her right arm. There was so much blood. Too much.

Whalen looked at him and then over his shoulder as the sound of rushing feet signaled other staff members racing into the room. "Did her tiger friend scratch her?"

"Yes," Adam said.

"It's dangerous. Move back and let us work."

"You have to save her," Adam said, snarling.

"We will," Whalen said, but although the words were brave, the intensity behind them told Adam that the doctor wasn't so sure he could.

Stepping back, he let the other people take over, his fingers slowly slipping off Cinder's skin until he had no contact with her. His head buzzed, rage coloring his vision as he spun on his heels and stormed out into the clinic. He could smell the cat in the building and wanted to deal with him.

"You!" the cat snarled from where he knelt between Adam's wolves. He already sported a busted lip and black eye, but Adam's own males showed injuries as well, so the cat had put up a good fight even though he was outnumbered eight to one.

"How do you know my mate?" Adam demanded.

The cat looked surprised. "Mate? Cinder?"

Adam nodded sharply.

The cat seemed to relax. "Oh, shit."

Brick, who had a tight grip on the cat's shoulder, said, "Oh shit what?"

"She said she felt weird. She smelled like…well, I don't know what she smelled like exactly. Kind of like a heat cycle but stronger. I didn't know she was your mate or I wouldn't have tried to take her away or kept your people from getting close."

"Why did you?" Adam didn't want to think about the cat and Cinder leaving and having sex. She said she had a date. Just how friendly were they?

"Because she asked me to. She was agitated and then she was in pain. I thought she wanted to have sex, but she didn't want me touching her."

"Who is she to you?"

"My friend and roommate. I'm one of her coven guards. But I think you know that already, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You told Leo to stay away, right? You already know everything about her that Leo could tell you, so you know that we live together and fuck around."

Adam bared his teeth. "Don't change the subject."

"I'm not. Look, she's my friend and she's injured. Until she's okay and she tells me to take a walk, I'm not going anywhere."

Brick said, "What do you want us to do?"

"Let him up."

Brick's brow rose in disbelief, but Adam wasn't interested in explaining himself at the moment. He looked over his shoulder to where doctors were trying to save his mate. The cat was the least of his worries. For now.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Adam was sitting in Whalen's office, waiting for news on his mate. The cat, Cyrus, was in the waiting room, along with two wolves to make sure he didn't try to get into Cinder's room. Adam wasn't sure he wouldn't slam his fist through the cat's smug face if he saw him again. Every time he met Cyrus's eyes, there was accusation in the gaze. Adam had fucked up. He'd chosen a bad place to hold a mate meeting.

Exhaling loudly, he rested his head on the back of the chair and stared at the ceiling.

"She'll forgive you," Angie said softly from where she sat in the office. She had come with his parents, after he'd told them what happened.

"Maybe."

"You're awesome. Of course she will."

Brick snorted and Adam lifted his head and glared at him. Brick's lips slammed together swiftly, and he looked down at the floor.

"You're a little biased, sis."

She grinned. "Maybe, but you're still pretty cool. I don't get what the tiger is still doing here. They're not mates and they're not even in a relationship by human standards."

"They're friends. I can't keep him away from her right now or she might hate me more."

"Since when do you care about that kind of thing?" Angie asked.

"What?"

"She's yours. You're not human and neither is she. When she wakes up, she'll realize what you are and won't want to be around that tiger anyway."

He smiled at his sister. She was sweet, even if she had a rose-colored-glasses outlook on life.

Before he could think of something to say, Whalen came to the door.

"You can see her now, Alpha."

Adam stood immediately and followed Whalen to the patient room. His mate lay on the bed, her skin as pale as the white sheets. Tubes were taped to the top of one hand, and her right arm was bandaged. Someone had dressed her in a hospital gown. She was unmoving except for the rise and fall of her chest.

"She's going to be okay?" His voice was tight. He couldn't hide the worry.

"Yes. She had a severe allergic reaction to the venom in Cyrus's claws. It overwhelmed her system, and I won't lie. She nearly died."

Adam gingerly held her hand, staring at the tubes and monitors hooked to her. "I didn't know tiger claws had venom."

"All cats do to an extent. Under normal circumstances, if Cyrus had pricked her skin, she wouldn't have had any reaction. But things being what they are, her body almost shut down for good."

Things being what they are?

Her hand was cold. He reached for the blanket folded at the bottom of the bed and drew it up over her. "What do you mean?"

Whalen folded his arms and looked at Cinder. "I know she's your mate and she's Wiccan, but something is happening because of both of those facts. What it is, I don't know, but her reaction was so severe that there has to be an underlying explanation. Why would an otherwise non-allergic female suddenly have a near-death experience because of a scratch?"

Adam's lip curled. "It was hardly a scratch. He shredded her arm."

Bandages covered the gashes. Adam could still see the wound in his mind's eye, her skin coated with dark-red blood.

"I simply meant that she had an excessive reaction. I think something more is going on here aside from her being your mate. When Wiccans and shifters mate, the Wiccan doesn't change, but Cinder appears to be changing."

Adam lifted his head and stared at the doctor. "Changing? What do you mean?"

"Her eyes were golden for a while. When I checked her pupils, they were bright gold. They're back to their normal color now, but that's weird."

"She's part wolf, though. Leo said her father was a shifter."

"I don't know, Adam. She's technically thirty-one. It's unheard of for

a shifter to shift so late in life. If she were going to shift, she would have in her teens."

Adam blew out a breath and turned his attention back to her. "How long will she be out?"

"A day maybe. She'll come out of it when her body is ready."

Nodding, he said, "Tell the cat he can come in, and tell Brick that I want the elders here. And thank you for saving my mate."

"She's my alpha too."

Adam was alone with his mate for only a few minutes before the cat hurried in and stood on the other side of her bed. Brick and the other pack members stood outside in the hallway.

"She's my mate," Adam said.

"I know that already." Cyrus's voice was tight and angry, but Adam didn't care.

"Things will be different for her now. You understand that, right?"

Cyrus glared at him. "She's not one of your minions you can order around. Just because you say *mate* doesn't mean that she'll understand it."

Adam wanted to tell Cyrus to shut up or he'd throw him through the window. Or both maybe. What he did instead was lean over and kiss Cinder's forehead, inhaling her melted sugar scent. "I need your keys," he said to Cyrus as he straightened.

"What?"

"She needs clothes when she wakes up. Unless you want me to break into your place, give me your keys."

Cyrus dug through his pocket with an aggravated snarl. "Tell your people to stay out of my room."

Adam caught the keys that Cyrus threw at him and walked out of the room. It was the most difficult thing he'd done, but he didn't particularly want to be around the cat at the moment and there were things to do.

* * * * *

"Come on back, sweetheart."

Someone's voice pushed through the dark haze surrounding Cinder

and beckoned her forward, tugging on the back of her neck as though she was a wayward puppy that needed instruction.

She tried to slip back into the darkness, but the voice was insistent and she felt compelled to listen. It took some effort, but she was able to force open her eyes. She found herself staring up at the plain, white ceiling tiles of one of the patient rooms in the clinic. She heard someone pacing nearby, and farther away, people were arguing.

"Hey," Adam said, leaning over the rail of the hospital bed, his dark hair sweeping forward over his brow. It made him look boyishly sweet, and for one glaring moment, she was tempted to reach for him and seek comfort in his arms.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Her voice rasped out past dry lips. "Where is Cyrus?"

Adam's smile slipped and he straightened. "He's out in the hallway."

He poured a cup of water for her from a pitcher on the nearby table and without asking, cupped the back of her head and lifted her enough so she could drink from it. It was almost sweet, except for the grimace on his face.

She wasn't sure why she felt compelled to explain anything, but she said, "He's my friend."

"Your lover," he sneered.

Drawing the covers up tighter to her chest, she glared up at him. "Who I take to bed isn't any of your concern."

He wrapped both hands around the rail of the bed and leaned over. "It is entirely my concern, Cinder. We're mates. Why do you think you're so drawn to me? Why do you think your libido went haywire after we met?"

"I'm not drawn to you," she said stiffly.

"Liar," he snarled.

Her mouth dropped open.

"I'm sorry you were hurt, but my wolves were doing what they needed to keep you safe."

"I don't need your protection, Adam."

"Don't you? The full moon is in nine days. How do you think you'll feel that night? Your cat can't satisfy you, and you know why."

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "Cyrus satisfies me just fine. In fact, we live together. So why don't you just take off and let

my *lover* take me home."

He bit back a snarl, his hands flexing on the plastic rail until it cracked under the pressure. He released his hands immediately and straightened. "You're *my* mate, Cinder. I scented you across the bar on Friday night, and I knew immediately that you were meant to be mine. The fact that you're also a witch is a bonus. Our pack needs a *Sahri* for the full moon gatherings. Come this full moon, if you're not by my side where you belong, what you felt tonight is only the tip of the iceberg. Only mates can satisfy each other, Cinder. And it goes both ways."

"What happened to Leo?"

He cracked his neck before answering. "Once we're mated, you can resume a platonic friendship with whomever you like. Until then, you're not to be around any unmated males."

"You can't tell me who I can be friends with," she argued.

His brow arched. "Can't I?"

As he turned to walk toward the door, part of her wanted to call him back and ask him to stay with her. She remembered feeling safe in his arms, and she liked that feeling. But the rest of her, the part that felt like it was slowly being taken over by this new primal side, wanted to tell him to go to hell in the worst way. While an internal battle raged, he opened the door and let in Cyrus and Dr. Whalen.

"I'll be seeing you, Cinder," Adam said in a tone that brooked no argument. The door clicked shut, and Cyrus rushed to her side, hugging her gently as he avoided the bandaged portion of her right arm.

"I said you could be in here, but I'm not going to watch you manhandle my alpha's mate," Dr. Whalen growled, and for the first time since she'd known him, the doctor looked frazzled.

"Not you too." She patted Cyrus's hand and he let go, stepping only as far as her outstretched arm would go. He gripped her hand tightly, his body vibrating with annoyance and barely contained anger.

"The mate-call, Cinder, is nothing to be flippant about. Adam recognized you immediately by your scent, and he asked me to set up a meeting so that he could introduce himself to you. If you hadn't run out so fast, you wouldn't have gone into the mate-heat like you did. Being away from your mate at first can drive you insane with need. Don't you know anything about your wolf heritage?"

He fiddled with the chart and glared at her over the clipboard as though she were a wayward child. And right then, she felt pretty

damn petulant. She didn't need another wolf telling her what to do. "I'm barely a wolf. I'm almost entirely Wiccan. Whatever I do with my friends isn't anyone's business but ours, so I'll thank you very much to keep your opinions to yourself."

He put the chart back on the end of the bed and folded his arms. "When you first started working for me, I would have agreed with that, Cinder. Only on the full moon did I ever catch a scent of wolf from you, but it was always so faint and buried. Once you started seeing the young wolf from our pack, your scent increased, slowly but steadily. When you were out a few weeks ago because of your heat cycle, I would have been hard pressed to tell you apart from a full blooded she-wolf. You act like one, you smell like one. The only thing you don't have going for you is the ability to shift. Tell me the truth, Cinder. Did you ever have a heat cycle like you did in September?"

She shook her head. It had been heaven and hell wrapped up in screaming hot sex. The past seasonal cycles had barely affected her. She'd always believed the wolf part of her was so small that it was of no consequence. She relied on her Wiccan nature and never tried to nurture the wolf. If she wasn't going to be part of a pack, then it didn't matter anyway.

She felt tears sting her eyes and she looked at Dr. Whalen. "Why now? Shouldn't it have happened before?"

He sighed deeply. "To tell you the truth, I've never known a true hybrid like yourself, one born of Wiccan and werewolf genes. My best educated guess is that the reason you never truly felt your wolf is that she was waiting for her mate. When you came here, you connected first with me, a wolf who's part of your mate's pack, and then with Leo, another wolf in our pack. Your wolf is ready to stretch her legs now that you're home, Cinder. You just have to let go and trust Adam to help you."

Her home? Her mate? Her wolf? Defiance crept through her even as her wolf growled in agreement. "If I refuse? If I pack up tonight and leave town?"

"First of all, you're not leaving until tomorrow morning. Second of all, you're not going to get very far. The mate-call is a powerful thing. It's meant to secure a mating, to bind the two together so they can begin their new life."

"I don't accept this." She shook her head. "I want my life to go back the way it was."

He moved to the bed and picked up her right arm, carefully peeling

away the layer of bandages, revealing four angry scratches across the meat of her bicep. "You reacted badly because you are allergic to the venom in Cyrus's claws. Only werewolves react so violently in their human form to tiger attacks. You went into anaphylactic shock. If Adam hadn't brought you back inside, you could have died. You can't go back to the life you had before, because that life doesn't exist anymore." He fixed the bandages and laid her arm gently back on the bed. "You are a werewolf, Cinder, and the perfect mate for our alpha, which makes you a female of standing in the pack. I have known many alphas in my long lifetime, and Adam is not only a great leader, but also a good man. Think about that tonight while you rest. I'll check on you in the morning."

The door shut quietly as the doctor left, and Cyrus pulled a chair up next to the bed and looked at her. "I can't believe you're allergic to me."

She started to laugh, but choked on the tears, curling onto her side and holding Cyrus's hand tightly to her chest. Immediately, she felt as if she was doing something wrong by holding onto Cyrus, as if she were betraying someone.

She knew exactly who that someone was.

When Dr. Whalen released her the following morning and told her take the night off from work, she sat on the edge of the bed in the light pink hospital gown and looked at her ruined blouse. There was a soft knock at the door, and Cyrus pulled it open. A young woman stood outside, holding a small travel bag. "I'm Angie, Adam's sister. He asked me to bring some things for you."

Cyrus let her in the room, snarling at the two men who stood outside in the hallway, before he shut the door.

"Who were those guys?" Cinder asked as Angie walked to the bed.

"Wolves from our pack. Adam made sure there were guards here all night."

Cinder pressed her lips together. She did *not* think that was awesome.

Taking the bag from Angie, she pulled open the zipper and said, "These are my clothes. How did you get them?"

Cyrus answered, "I gave him the key to our place."

"What?"

"He asked for the key, suggesting he'd break in if I didn't hand it over, so in the interest of not messing up our security deposit, I gave the key to him."

Cinder frowned and looked at Angie, who had her head down and was trembling as though she were frightened. Did she think she was in trouble?

"Thanks, Angie. I appreciate it."

She lifted her head and smiled brightly and then hurried from the room. Cyrus found something about the situation funny and seemed to be trying hard not to laugh.

"Shut up," she groused as she stripped off the gown and changed into comfortable jeans and a short sleeved top. The wound on her arm had healed overnight – thanks to her accelerated healing – and hadn't even scarred. She'd always attributed her healing abilities to her Wiccan nature, but if it were true that she was becoming more in tune with her werewolf side, then she didn't know what that meant for her Wiccan half.

The guards introduced themselves as Brick and Solan as she and Cyrus left the room. They followed her and Cyrus out of the clinic and they walked to a vehicle parked directly behind Cyrus's truck.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"We're seeing you safely home as instructed," Solan said.

Cyrus chuckled as he pulled open the passenger door and she said, "It's not funny."

"It totally is," he said, grinning as he shut her door. He climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine.

"You're certainly warming up to the wolves," she said.

He glanced at her as he pulled out into the street. "Hey, I was pissed last night because the wolves caused you to get hurt. But Adam's a solid guy. His people worship the ground he walks on. And more than that, he stood by your bedside all night. He didn't take off until the doc came in after you woke up."

She looked at her roommate. This was a serious side of Cyrus she hadn't seen before. "You believe all this mate-call and mate-heat stuff?"

"Hell yeah. Maybe Wiccans don't have that sort of thing, but I can tell you one thing for sure: Adam believes you're his mate and there isn't anything on earth that will stop a male from being with his woman. He's backing off because you're freaked out and pissed off, and that shows an incredible amount of restraint."

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. "What we have together is just casual, and even you can admit that it's starting to wear thin.

Once Leo started to come around, you wanted something more out of your life than the passing fucks. Someday, I hope I'll find a female I'm mate-called to. It's something to be cherished, not feared. A truemate would never harm his bride, and he would lay down his own life for hers. Don't you want that?"

"It's fast," she murmured, releasing his hand and staring out the window.

"Real mate-calls are like that. Out of the blue, bulldoze right over you kind of stuff. You're lucky, Cin. Real lucky."

Maybe he was right.

It turned out that swiping clothes for her wasn't the only thing that Adam and his pack had done. The condo had been cleaned from floor to ceiling. The fridge was well stocked, including a prepared plate covered with plastic wrap. Flowers graced every flat surface from the kitchen to her bedroom. It looked like a florist had gone haywire.

Cyrus, chuckling quietly, went to his room and left her to stare at the note on the counter, the thin piece of light blue paper was wrapped around the stem of a single yellow rose with red tips. She slipped the paper off and opened it as she touched the satiny tip of the flower to her nose and inhaled. It smelled sweet and perfect.

Cinder, please join me for dinner tonight at eight. A car will be around for you at seven fifteen. Adam.

She crumpled the paper and tossed it in the trash. She'd never met a more infuriating male in her life. Ignoring the desire to call the phone number scrawled at the bottom of the note, she pulled the plate out of the fridge and ate. Once more, she found herself of two minds about her current situation. She wanted to see him, but she didn't want him to think she was going to come running every time he snapped his fingers. She could admit – at least to herself – that if they'd met in a club, she might have eagerly taken him home and enjoyed the hell out of him. But this whole I'm-the-alpha business just didn't sit right with her. She never considered herself a wolf, just a witch who happened to have a father who was one. She felt adrift in a sea of confusion, tossed about and unsure.

* * * * *

There was a knock at the door promptly at seven fifteen. She opened it and found Brick and Solan. Brick's gaze moved up and down her body, and he frowned. She was wearing a pair of lounge pants with

cartoon devils on them and an oversize sleep shirt.

When he said nothing, she said, “I’m not going, in case you can’t tell.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but Solan elbowed him. Shutting his mouth with a firm click of his teeth, he nodded and they turned and walked away. She peeked out of her apartment and saw them getting into a sleek black town car.

She shut the door slowly, a little stunned that they hadn’t argued or asked for an explanation.

Striding through the apartment, she knocked twice on Cyrus’s door and opened it. He was sitting at his desk.

“Wanna go out and get a beer? My treat.”

He swiveled in the desk chair and smiled. “Sure.”

She smiled back at him and went into her bedroom to get dressed. She ignored the vase of gorgeous pink lilies on the dresser as she pulled out a pair of socks. Guilt pricked at her for choosing to go out with her roommate instead of the male who had saved her life. Hell, she hadn’t even thanked him for what he’d done; instead, she’d been defensive.

“Why don’t you want to see him?” Cyrus asked her later when they were sitting at a dive bar known as the Crow’s Nest. She sipped at her beer and played her fingers across the marred, dark wood of the counter.

“Because it’s too weird, too fast. And I don’t like anyone making decisions for me and ordering me around.”

Cyrus turned slightly on the barstool and regarded her carefully. “You can ignore this stuff for only so long, Cin. You are already showing signs of your werewolf nature. I know it’s scary, but it would be scarier going through a shift for the first time by yourself. At your age, I’m not sure that you can even go through it on your own.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you do eventually shift, it may be a long, difficult process. Your wolf side, if she does really exist, has lain dormant. Maybe if your father had stuck around and exposed you to his wolf pack, then you would have come into your shift earlier. You need someone to help you, baby girl. The full moon is eight days from now. I think you need to give Adam a chance.”

“You weres sure do stick together.”

* * * * *

Adam stared at the empty chair across from him. The restaurant hummed with activity, but he was like an island in the middle of it all. Cinder should have been sitting with him, letting him treat her to a gourmet dinner and giving him a chance to not act like a possessive jackass. He knew he'd gotten off on the wrong foot with her at the hospital. He'd practically shoved her relationship with the cat in her face and shown his disapproval. She was clearly loyal to her friends. He admired that quality, even as he wished he had her loyalty for himself.

Wadding up the napkin from his lap, he stood and looked at the table behind him where Brick, Solan, and Joe were sitting. Each male tried to look neutral, but Adam saw that they were embarrassed for him. Hell, he was embarrassed for himself. He'd never had a female turn down a dinner invitation. Part of him wanted to go home and forget he'd ever laid eyes on the beautiful witch, but the other part of him howled to go to her and make the situation right. He would never be happy until Cinder Knight was in his arms for good.

Solan stood slowly. "Want to go to Lycos?"

"Nah. You guys go if you want to. I'm heading home."

After leaving enough money on the table to cover his drink, he strode through the restaurant and out into the parking lot. He unlocked the door to his BMW, sat down, and slammed the door. The scent of roses filled the interior, and he looked at the bouquet he'd left there for Cinder, planning to give it to her at the end of dinner. As he pulled out of the parking lot, he debated his next step.

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Chapter 5

Cinder tried to take a nap the following afternoon, but her body was humming like a tuning fork and her mind was a jumbled mess. She could feel her wolf more strongly now, as if someone had given the creature a boost. She'd slept like hell Tuesday night, which she wanted to attribute to lingering anxiety from almost dying due to Cyrus's venomous claws. But she knew it wasn't that. Her wolf wanted Adam. Wanted to be in the same place as him, the same room, hell, even the same bed. Cinder had spent a good portion of the night arguing with the absurd creature about Adam, but all she'd wound up with was a headache from lack of sleep. She hadn't been able to nap either. Before she had met Adam, she would have crawled into bed with Cyrus for a tumble in the sheets, but she couldn't bring herself to be around him like that anymore.

When she'd finally given up and decided to get ready for work, she tried to find something in the kitchen to eat, but nothing sounded appetizing.

Someone knocked loudly on the door. She answered it and found Solan holding a large paper sack.

"Adam asked me to bring you lunch." He eased past her and set the sack on the counter and busied himself in the kitchen. Within minutes, he'd set a table for her and left without another word.

The scent of roasted meat filled the room, and her stomach rumbled. Sitting down at the table, she looked at the plate that contained a thick steak and a pile of mashed red potatoes. A glass filled with white grape juice sat next to the plate, along with a small platter containing a wedge of cheesecake topped with strawberries.

She opened the card with her name on it.

Cinder, have a good night at work. Adam.

Even though she tried to stop it, she couldn't help but smile. He was rewarding her, even though she had surely pissed him off by going out with Cyrus instead of meeting him at the restaurant the night before. When she finished eating the best steak dinner she'd had in years, she

cleaned up and headed into work.

She really did love working at the clinic. Being a Wiccan meant she was in touch with nature in a way that humans weren't. But more than that, being part of the clinic meant she was also helping people, even in a small way, who could be shunned and abused by the human medical establishment.

As the sun set, she busied herself filling out requisitions for supplies. Someone rapped on the counter, scaring her.

Clutching her chest and gasping, she saw Angie, Adam's sister, looking meek and frightened again.

"S-sorry, Cinder."

"Holy shit, girl, you need to wear a bell or something." She willed her pulse to stop racing, inhaling slow, measured breaths.

Angie placed a narrow black box tied with a red ribbon on the counter. "Adam would like for you to meet him after work at the alpha's house. I'm to drive you there."

"Alpha's house?" She pulled the ribbon from the box and opened it. Inside was a howling wolf charm hanging from a delicate necklace.

"Our pack owns a large parcel of land outside of the city. Most of the members of our pack live on the land in several large homes. The largest home is the alpha's house, where Adam and our family lives, along with the top-ranked wolves."

She raised a brow as she slid the lid back on the box, leaving the necklace inside. "How many wolves are in your pack?"

"One hundred and three. We have a few little ones, but most of our members are older than eighteen."

"How old are you, Angie?"

"Eighteen plus five."

Cinder inhaled slowly and exhaled, carefully choosing her words. "No thank you, Angie. I won't be joining Adam at the alpha's house, or anywhere else. Please thank him for the gift, but I can't accept it."

She slid the box over the counter, and Angie stared at her in shock, with a little bit of fear lighting her pretty features.

"But–" she panted, fear rising in her eyes.

"Excuse me?" Cinder folded her arms and gave her a stern look.

She closed her mouth and turned on her heels, moving quickly out the front door, leaving the gift behind. *That was interesting.*

As the evening waned and her shift came to an end, she walked back to Dr. Whalen's office and rapped on the doorjamb. He glanced up from a legal pad on which he was jotting notes.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm taking off for the night."

"How are you feeling?"

"Um, okay, I guess."

His brow arched and he stared at her for a long moment and then folded his hands on top of the legal pad and said, "When wolf mates meet for the first time, something clicks between them. The beginning of a connection blooms. Wolves' first instincts are to cement the mating – bond to each other. If something prevents the wolves from bonding, the connection is strained. Biology steps in and tries to force the wolves to bond, driving them mad with lust. The longer the connection is denied, the worse the feelings of lust will grow, especially as the full moon draws closer. I don't have to tell you that it's in seven days."

She was not going to tell him about the bad night's sleep and her inability to do much of anything outside of thinking about Adam. She wanted to tell him to stay out of her personal life, but instead she said, "I'm not a full wolf. My father met me when I turned eighteen and said I was all witch and not worth his time. Don't you think if I were enough wolf to shift that I would have done it before now and my own father would have recognized that part of me?"

"I don't know anything about your father. What I do know is that right now, you smell like a full wolf to me. Being with Leo and working for me woke something inside you, and meeting Adam has opened up your true potential." He leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtful. "My mate had a boyfriend in her pack before we met. They were all set to mate and start a family. Their families were close, and it was one of those situations where everyone just assumed they were meant to be together. It didn't matter that they didn't feel truly connected to each other. Then she saw me across campus one day. She followed me to my class and waited outside the door during a two-hour lecture." He smiled fondly. "I walked out of the class, and it was like getting hit over the head with a sledgehammer. I knew she was mine and she knew I was hers. We spent the week together, and then I took her to her home pack, and we mated officially before them."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You had sex in front of her family?"

He chuckled. "That was the way things used to be done, Cinder. The pack had to witness the first mating. Our wolves enjoy seeing a

couple mate. There's a shared pleasure that happens with the pack. It's especially true of the alpha couple too."

Her stomach fluttered, and the image of being with Adam in front of his pack flashed through her mind. She'd never considered herself kinky, but there was something very erotic about it.

"I didn't know wolves were voyeurs."

"Don't be so flippant. The alphas share their pleasure through their connection to the pack. When the alpha pair is in love, the pack is blessed. It's just how our kind works."

Cinder chewed on her bottom lip for a moment and tried not to think about how sexy Adam probably looked out of his clothes, bathed in moonlight.

"I only meant to come in here and say goodnight. I should go." She squeezed her hands together to stop them from trembling. Dr. Whalen's words had rattled her. She could feel her resolve to stay away from the controlling alpha weakening.

"You could still go see him. I can drive you to the alpha's house."

"No, thanks. Good night, Dr. Whalen," she said, turning swiftly and walking down the hallway as fast as she could without actually running. Even after she grabbed her purse and drove home, locked her front door, and tossed her keys and the gift box on the counter, she couldn't shake the desire to see him.

The gift box taunted her.

She walked past it and headed to her bedroom. She glanced down the hallway to see that Cyrus's door was shut, and she knew he was already asleep because of his early morning shift. Shutting her bedroom door, she leaned against it and closed her eyes. Being around Dr. Whalen had made her feel more connected to Adam. She supposed it had something to do with them being in the same pack, but since she had no clue about the wolf side of herself, she could only guess.

Throwing her clothes into the hamper, she pulled on a sleep shirt and flopped onto the bed. She tossed and turned, trying to shut down her brain so she could rest, but the alpha with his icy blue eyes taunted her. She was tempted a dozen times to pull her vibrator from her top drawer. When she finally sat up and tugged open the drawer, she found the vibrator was gone. In its place was a folded piece of blue paper. Her hands trembled as she opened it, and anger filled her.

Nothing but your mate's cock will do, Cinder. Come to me now before you're overwhelmed. We belong together. Adam

She squeezed her hand into a tight fist, crushing the paper. The nerve! It was one thing to be bossy, but it was an entirely different thing to take away her battery-operated boyfriend.

Seething, she threw the wad of paper in the corner and flopped back on the bed. Rubbing the heels of her hands against her closed eyes, she growled in aggravation. She knew she couldn't wake up Cyrus, and she wasn't sure she'd even want him touching her anyway. Without her vibrator, she'd have to settle for her fingers and there was something about that action that was grating on her. Maybe because her wolf was panting for Adam's hands, not her own.

Well, if he thought he was going to get her to come running just because he'd had his people swipe her pretty purple vibrator, he had another thing coming.

Rolling over, she tugged the covers over herself and told the whining wolf in her head to shut up and go to sleep.

* * * * *

Adam paced at the front window, waiting for Angie's car to return. Cinder would be with her, and he would finally have his mate in his home where she needed to be. He was alone in the front room. He'd been snarling at his pack all evening, waiting for Cinder to arrive, and they'd wisely chosen to leave him alone. He could hear them in the house, though. His parents were in the kitchen. Brick and Solan were playing a video game in the den.

The house was old and big and had been the alpha's home for several generations. When he took over as alpha, he'd been tempted to give up the home and stay in his own place, but the pack was traditional, and it hadn't been a hardship to move from his small two-bedroom and into the enormous house. He had the entire third floor to himself. The master suite had what his sister called an "epic bathroom" and along with an office on the floor, there were also four bedrooms. The bedroom doors were always shut. But ever since he'd seen Cinder, he'd been thinking about those rooms. Thinking about the pups who would live in them. A girl with Cinder's beautiful green eyes. A boy with his dark hair. He'd never been one to think much about having his own family, but now he couldn't stop.

Headlights flashed as a car turned down the long driveway. He knew it was Angie's, and he watched intently, trying to calm his excited wolf. Angie's car parked in the grass in front of the house and the

headlights turned off. There was no movement for several minutes and wariness settled over him. The driver's door opened, and the overhead light illuminated the interior as she climbed out. Cinder was not in the car.

He snarled loudly. Angie opened the front door, and Adam faced her. She dropped to her knees with a soft sob and said, "I'm sorry. She made me leave and said she wouldn't–"

"Wouldn't what?" he said, growling darkly.

"Wouldn't accept your gift or come here."

"Why?"

Angie sniffled and shuddered. "I don't know, alpha, I'm sorry. I-I-I'm s-sorry."

His lip curled and he fought the urge to throw something. "Get out."

She scampered away, leaving him alone in the room. He turned toward the window, anger boiling through him. What was it going to take to get Cinder to see that they were mates? Surely she could feel the connection to him. She might be a witch, but that didn't mean she would be immune to the pull of their mating connection. He'd seen the evidence of her desire for him the night she almost died. How could she keep away from him?

An image flashed in his mind of the tiger, and he slammed his fist into the wall with an aggravated growl. His hand smashed through the plaster with a loud thud.

"Brick!" He snarled his beta's name loud enough to wake the dead.

Brick's heavy footsteps rushed toward him. "Yes, Alpha?"

"Get me the tiger king on the phone. Now."

Brick opened his mouth as if to protest and Adam snarled. Brick's mouth snapped shut with a click, and he spun on his heels and raced into the kitchen. A few moments later, he heard Brick ask if Midas was available to speak to Adam. He returned to the front room and handed his cell to Adam.

"Hello, Midas," Adam said, reining in his rage.

"Adam. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

All the leaders of the were-groups in the area were friendly. They had their own territories and handled their own people's issues. There was an unspoken rule among the leaders that if there were an issue among their people, they would reach out to the leaders first before any actions were taken. Adam wanted the tiger out of Cinder's life. He

was certain that the male was influencing his mate negatively. Cats and wolves didn't necessarily get along, especially where females were concerned. He and Midas were on friendly terms, though, and he had no qualms about asking the male to step in.

Adam laid out his issues with the cat.

There was a long pause, and then Midas said, "You're certain Cinder is your mate?"

"Yes." Adam barely stopped from growling the word.

"Cyrus is an honorable male. He wouldn't overstep with another male's mate. They're friends and roommates. I would know if there were more going on between them."

Adam let the silence stretch.

Midas exhaled. "I'll speak to Cyrus."

"I don't want you to just speak to him. I want him out of her apartment."

"Are you certain you want to go this route? I don't know Cinder personally, but I would wager that most women wouldn't appreciate someone being so heavy handed."

"Would you tolerate another male living with your mate when you weren't around?"

"Of course not."

"If I see that tiger around her again before we're mated, I can't be held responsible for my actions."

"It's unnecessary to threaten my pride member."

"I'm not. I'm just speaking the truth."

There was a brief, tense pause. "He'll be gone tomorrow."

"I owe you one."

Midas chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind when I'm ready to trade in my SUV."

Adam snorted and ended the call. The wolf pack owned a car dealership, and most of the weres in the area came to them for better deals than they received at human-owned dealerships. Although weres had been known to humankind for years, there were still those who had prejudices against shifters for no reason other than the fact that they were different.

"Adam?" Angie's voice was soft and low.

He turned to face her. “Yes?”

“Don’t do this.”

“What?”

“Take Cinder’s friend. You already took Leo from her.”

Adam growled and Angie’s eyes widened. Her fear scented the air like sour milk. “Don’t mention that pup to me again.”

Angie’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, and she dropped her head and backed out of the room. Guilt pricked at him, but he shoved away the unwanted feeling. He was making the best decision for his relationship with Cinder. With the tiger gone, she would have to deal with their mating on her own. It wouldn’t take long before the mate-heat became too much to bear, and then she’d come to him. Taking the tiger out of the equation meant she would have no choice but to turn to Adam. He wasn’t a patient male by any stretch, and he hoped she’d turn to him sooner, rather than later.

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Chapter 6

Cinder felt Angie before she even opened the door to the clinic Thursday night. She normally worked at the Cleveland Mother Earth Store on Thursdays and Fridays, but Doc Whalen had asked her to work Thursday to make up for missing Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Brick had brought lunch for her, and she'd been treated to homemade fettuccine alfredo courtesy of Adam's mom. Cinder had liked the meal so much that she decided to wear the pendant Adam sent for her. The wolf charm was warm and comforting as it hung around her neck.

Angie had a small silver gift bag in her hand, and she set it on the counter. Cinder heard a tinkling sound, and she noticed that Angie was wearing a bracelet with little bells hanging from it.

Grinning, Cinder reached for the bag and said, "I didn't mean you literally had to wear bells."

Angie wiggled her arm, and the bells danced. "All morning my mom kept saying she was hearing bells, and I didn't tell her it was my bracelet. She thought she was losing her mind. It was pretty hilarious."

"Brick said your mom made my lunch. It was delicious."

"I'll tell her you said so. It's one of my favorite meals of hers too."

Cinder pulled a tuft of tissue paper from the bag and extracted a small white box. She lifted the lid and found four squares of chocolate, stamped with the name of her favorite candy shop.

She put down the box and stared at the contents for a long moment before looking at Angie. "He asked Leo what my favorite candy is, didn't he?"

Angie's gaze seemed to light everywhere but on Cinder's. "Yes."

Cinder put the lid on the box and said, "It's bad enough he took my friend away, but to mine him for information about me just seems…

really shitty."

"I'm sorry, Cinder."

"It's not your fault. I guess I don't hate him for trying to figure out what I like, but he could have asked me. Does he ever do anything himself or does he always send people for him?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's sent Solan and Brick to bring me lunch. I'm betting he didn't clean my apartment himself while I was in the hospital, and you've brought me gifts the last two nights from him. Doesn't he know it would mean more if he did these errands himself?"

Angie shrugged but seemed to agree. "He's alpha."

"And?"

"And nothing."

Cinder leaned back in the chair and looked at the young wolf. "If I were a she-wolf in the pack, would he be doing this kind of thing?"

"If you were in the pack, you'd be thrilled to be his mate."

"Because he's alpha."

Angie nodded.

Cinder thanked Angie for the chocolates and turned down the invitation for a ride to Adam's home. After Angie left, Cinder felt an odd twist in her stomach, a mild cramp that made her pause. She picked up the bag and sniffed it, finding it smelled like Adam had, like the woods at night. Her stomach twisted again, and she put down the bag and pushed it to the edge of the desk. She felt irked at Adam for talking to Leo about her. For all she knew, Leo had told Adam about her bedroom habits. A blush crept up her neck as she wondered whether Adam had asked Leo what she was like in bed. She really didn't want to know what males talked about when they talked about sex, although she truly hoped Leo had only good things to say about her.

Her thoughts remained on Adam as she worked, and by the time her shift was finished, she was tempted to go to his house. As she drove home, she gave into her temptation. He'd told her that the intensity of their connection would grow as the full moon drew closer, and although she didn't appreciate his heavy-handedness with her life, she couldn't deny that she was attracted to him and curious about what their future held.

She walked into her apartment and went straight to her room to

change. She took her phone from her purse to call Leo and ask for the alpha's address, but she realized how quiet the house was.

Leaving her room, she walked to Cyrus's and knocked. There was no answer, and she pushed open the door and flicked on the light, gasping in shock to see the empty room, save for the stripped bed. The closet door was open and cleaned out.

Feeling confusion and worry, she dialed Cyrus's cell. He answered on the fourth ring, his voice low and calm. "Hi, sweetheart."

"What the hell?" she sputtered. "You moved out? Why?"

There was a significant pause. "I'm sorry, but I didn't have a choice. The order came from Midas after you left for work. He told me to move out, and he's my king."

"Why would Midas care that we're living together?" She frowned and then just as quickly, she realized why. "Adam asked Midas to make you leave, didn't he?" Sadness and anger warred inside her.

"I'm sorry, Cin, truly," his voice softened slightly, "but this isn't about you and me. I'll always be your friend, but until you get things squared away with the wolf pack, I'm forbidden from seeing you."

She didn't remember saying goodbye due to her shock, hearing only the click as Cyrus ended the call. A week ago she'd had no complaints in her life, but one meeting with the alpha wolf and she'd slowly lost everything because Adam was a jealous asshole.

Tears blurred her eyes as she stepped out of Cyrus's room and shut the door. Turning toward her own room, she took off the necklace and put it back into the box, leaving it on the dresser along with the box of chocolates. She stripped and climbed into bed and quickly found herself at the forefront of another sleepless night. Her whole body ached, and nothing took the edge off. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Adam. His beautiful eyes. His sexy grin.

In the morning, she put the necklace and chocolates in a big envelope, wrote Adam's name on the front, and taped it to the door. Even though she didn't have to be at the Wiccan store until later in the afternoon, she didn't want to deal with Solan or Brick.

She parked behind the Wiccan store and closed her eyes, resting her forehead on the steering wheel. She'd never felt so out of sorts before. Yes, she missed Leo and Cyrus, and she was totally aggravated with Adam, but she felt as though she was completely out of touch with what had always centered her – being near other Wiccans.

She opened her eyes and looked at her GPS screen, seeing the button to open her contacts. She pushed the button and scrolled through the

names until she found her mom's cell number and dialed.

"I was just thinking of you, darling," her mom said when she answered. "The night blooming jasmine smelled so amazing last night, and I know that's one of your favorite flowers."

There was only a brief pause before Cinder started to cry and told her mom everything.

"I'm so sorry, Cinder," her mom said. "What can I do?"

"Father said I wasn't a wolf at all, but the shifters around me have all said I might shift with this coming moon, and that means I'm in the presence of my mate. What should I do?"

"You know I can't tell you that. Only you can decide your choices in life."

"He's taking my choices away."

"So the young wolf or the tiger was your mate? I don't think so, or you wouldn't feel so torn about the wolf. Wolves are, generally speaking, possessive jackasses. I'd suspect that is especially true for an alpha."

"Was father like that?"

Her mom sighed. "Oh, Cinder, he wasn't my mate and I wasn't his. We met at a bar and had a one-night stand. I had to track him down to tell him I was pregnant. It's why he was never part of your life, or mine."

Cinder lifted her head from the steering wheel and stared at the GPS screen. "I knew you weren't really mates, but I thought there was a relationship of some kind."

"No. He was, and still is, very wrapped up in his pack, and unlike most packs nowadays, his is very anti-anyone who isn't a wolf. I would have stuck out like a sore thumb."

"I thought wolf packs always have a *Sahri* for full moons and ceremonies."

"Not the old-school packs. They may hire one of us from time to time, but they don't want us in their ranks. I'm thankful that you weren't wolf enough for your father. He probably would have tried to take you from me and mate you to someone in his pack."

Cinder grunted and laid her head against the headrest. "Adam is such an asshole, but aside from taking away Leo and Cyrus, he hasn't done anything but try to be nice to me. I'm scared."

"Of what?"

“Losing everything.”

“What if you gain more than you lose? If it’s really true that you’re his mate and that you’re slowly becoming a shifter, then you need him. You’re way past the age when you would have normally shifted, so meeting him and his pack members has flipped a switch in your body. I know you want to be independent, and I don’t know this Adam fellow, but you can’t really ignore biology. Your body is going to do whatever it’s going to do, whether you approve or not. Wouldn’t it be better to have your mate with you, even if he is a jackass?”

Cinder laughed and a few more tears escaped, slipping down her cheeks. She brushed them off and said, “Thanks, Mom.”

“I’ll say a blessing for you. I love you, sweet daughter of mine.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

Cinder got out of her car, and the moment she shut her door, she felt Adam. Turning slowly, she saw him standing a few yards away, with a big black SUV behind him. “Adam?”

“I’m not sending anyone else to talk to you, bring you gifts, or cook you meals, Cinder.”

“You took my friends away.”

“I’m not going to apologize for that,” he said, sniffing and crossing his arms over his chest.

She leaned against her door. “I didn’t ask you to. I was just pointing out that you’re an asshole.”

His eyes narrowed and she wondered if she were really one of his wolves, would she have been afraid of inciting his wrath?

“Why are you here, Adam?”

“Because you belong with me.”

Her back stiffened, and a hundred nasty retorts flipped through her mind. But as she stared at him and considered the very best way to insult him, she finally really looked at him and saw something she hadn’t seen before. Although on the surface he appeared to be in complete control, if not totally annoyed with her, his eyes were dark with unhappiness. The ice blue was dull, and dark circles under his eyes spoke of a lack of sleep.

She took a step closer. “What do you want from me?”

“Be mine.”

She shook her head and moved one more step toward him. “I don’t

know you. You've bulldozed over my life without even talking to me. You can't manhandle me. I'm not a wolf, not really."

He dropped his arms and ran one hand through his dark hair. He took a step closer to her. "I'm sorry."

"I thought you didn't apologize."

"I don't. But I don't want you to hate me, and I don't want you to think of me as an ogre. I'm used to snapping my fingers and having everyone do what I say. You try my patience."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're hardly patient. We only met a few days ago, and you're systematically dismantling my life."

He moved again, shortening the distance. His scent washed over her, and she felt the wolf part of herself snap to attention. Something stretched under her skin, like the wolf was trying to get through her body to him. Her stomach twisted, and she winced at the slight pain, not entirely unpleasant but not welcome at the moment.

Adam was suddenly in front of her, his arms around her tightly, pulling her hard against his body. The ache in her body changed, throbbing with the beat of her racing heart as she stared at his eyes. The blue of his irises slowly disappeared, eclipsed by pure gold that reminded her of the glow of the sun as it rose in the sky.

"It's getting worse," he said with a rough voice.

She let her hands rest on his chest. "I'm okay during the day for the most part, but I can't get comfortable at night. I can't sleep."

"I haven't been sleeping so well either."

"What happened to my vibrator? I want it back."

His brow arched. "It's gone."

"That thing cost ninety dollars!"

He snorted. "You don't need it."

She ducked her head to his chest with a groan. "You had me wishing I had a battery-operated toothbrush."

"Nothing artificial will take the edge off our mating, Cinder. Only you and me can do that. I'm suffering without you."

"I want you to replace it."

"Maybe. If you're very good. Or, wait, I actually think you're a naughty thing, so I guess I want you to be very, very bad. Then we'll talk."

Her head tipped back, and she couldn't help but smile at his big grin.

His hands flexed on her back, and she felt the ridge of his erection against her stomach. “What are you afraid of?”

“I don’t know what’s happening to me. You know this isn’t normal.”

“It might not be normal, but it’s going to happen whether you’re on board or not. Let me be there for you. Don’t push me away,” he spoke earnestly.

She harrumphed. “You’re the one who’s being pushy.”

His lip curled as a growl vibrated in his chest, making her palms tingle. “I’m being remarkably docile compared to what I’d like to do.”

“Which is what?”

“Throw you over my shoulder and take you back to the den.”

“Den? I thought you lived in a house?”

He grinned. “You’re changing the subject.”

She dropped her head to his chest and sighed. Tentatively, she wrapped her arms around his neck and actually hugged him. The tightness in her body, the strange twisting ache, settled as heat flared through her.

He nuzzled her hair, and she shivered. “You can’t deny the connection between us, Cinder. I know it’s new and frightening, but the full moon is only five days away. I can’t stand the distance between us.”

She rubbed her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes. “Can’t you ask me out on a date? Are wolves against being normal guys?”

He snorted. “I’m hardly normal.”

She laughed. “You’re proud of the weirdest things.”

He sighed exaggeratedly. “Fine. Go out with me tonight.”

She looked up at him. The gold was gone, and his eyes were back to the icy blue color she found so enchanting. He seemed more relaxed, and she could admit that while she was turned on, she wasn’t feeling nearly as out-of-sorts as she had before he showed up. “I’m off at four, and you can pick me up at six.”

“Five.”

“I wasn’t negotiating.”

“I was.”

“Five thirty.”

He lowered his head and kissed her. It was the simplest of kisses, just

a pressing of their lips together, but the whole world dropped away, and her wolf howled in her mind.

He lifted from her mouth and said, “Five thirty. Be safe.”

She had to force herself to let go of him. She smiled at him, and he watched her as she walked into the store until the door shut behind her and he was obscured from view. She almost opened the door to see him again; her hand gripped the door handle before she realized it, but she forced herself to let go and turn away, leaving her wolf behind. At least for now. She’d think more about the strange circumstances of her life later.

* * * * *

Adam waited until the door closed and then he turned as Joe and Solan walked around the corner of the building.

“Keep an eye on the building, and when her shift is over, make sure she gets home safely.”

“Why don’t you do what you said you wanted and take her home now?” Joe asked, folding his arms.

“Because she’s not a wolf, and I don’t want to drive her away.” He’d already made too many mistakes in a short period of time, and he could tell by the way she melted in his arms that he needed to have a softer touch. It went against his natural tendency to bend people to his will, but he didn’t want her to hate him. She was going to need him on the full moon, and he needed her too.

“We’ll make sure she gets home safely, Alpha,” Solan said.

Adam nodded and strode to his SUV. Five thirty couldn’t come fast enough.

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Chapter 7

Cinder was aware of the wolves watching the store. Not only had Lorene and two of the unnatural Wiccans mentioned it, but she'd felt them. It was as if being near one of Adam's wolves called to a deeper part of her being. She was tempted to talk to Lorene about the situation, but she decided to keep her thoughts to herself for now. With the full moon drawing closer, she was aware that her life might change drastically. She feared losing her powers if she actually shifted, which is what everyone seemed to assume would happen. She didn't know what she would do if she lost her connection to her powers over flame and fire.

Pushing those thoughts away, she walked up the steps to her apartment and smiled to see another envelope with her name on it in the same spot where she had taped Adam's envelope that morning.

Inside were the necklace and the chocolates. After popping a chocolate in her mouth and savoring the sweet, dark flavor, she headed to the bathroom to shower, with the necklace once more around her neck. She chose a black tank dress and paired it with her favorite kitten heels. She double-checked her makeup and fluffed her hair, debating once more on whether she should wear her long tresses up or down.

There was a sharp knock on the door, and she felt her body clench low in her belly. Letting her hair fall back down, she walked quickly to the door and took a moment to settle her nerves before she opened it. Adam, dressed in a black suit with a black shirt and red tie, stood before her with a single red rose in his hand.

He growled, the sound sultry and filled with hidden promises. She took the rose, a red so deep it bordered on black.

"It's the color of passion and commitment," he said, his voice low and growly.

She touched the bloom to her nose and inhaled the sweet scent. She peeked at him and found him watching her intently. "You're

dangerous, Adam Beaumont."

"Never to you, and only to those who would try to harm you."

Wow. That made the panty-dropping alarms go off in her head. Stepping out and closing the door behind her, so she didn't do something embarrassing and invite him to spend a week naked in her bed, she smiled. "What are we up to tonight?"

"Dinner and dancing. How's that sound?" He offered her his arm, and she looped hers through.

"Really good."

He opened the passenger door of his SUV and helped her inside, and after shutting the door, he strode around the front and climbed behind the wheel. On the way to dinner, he asked her about her work at the Wiccan store.

"You're a natural Wiccan, right?"

"Yes, south power, which is fire."

"Can you just think something on fire?"

"There are basic spells for lighting items on fire, but I can throw my power to an object and set it on fire without a spell. When I was younger, I had trouble controlling it. When I would get upset, objects near me would catch on fire. My mom went through five sets of curtains in my bedroom before she gave up and said I had to deal with uncovered windows until I could handle myself."

He chuckled. "Sounds like what pups go through. It's hard to know how to deal with power no matter what form it comes in. Young pups can lose control when they get emotional and people can get hurt."

"Did you ever hurt anyone, when you were young?"

"No. I've always been careful to handle the beast, but others aren't so lucky. I had great teachers in my father and grandfather."

"Why isn't your dad alpha? Aren't packs like a family hierarchy with who becomes the alpha?"

"Not at all. The alpha is the best male in the pack. Before me, it was a male named Lit, and he was a great alpha, but he had family issues and was too distracted to take care of the pack. I was third ranked and knew that it was just a matter of time before someone tried to kill him to take over."

"Why didn't his number two guy become the alpha when he couldn't?"

"Because I skipped over him and took out Lit. It was the right time,

and the beta is Brick, who is my cousin. He's an excellent beta, but he's not alpha material. You have to be ruthless at times."

"You mean being an asshole?"

"Not just that," he said, laughing. He stopped the SUV in front of a restaurant and turned off the engine. "If I could go back, I would grab you on the dance floor that first night and sweep you off your feet. But I didn't do that. I treated you like a wolf, and you almost died. I'm furious at myself for what happened."

"I'll forgive you eventually, don't worry."

"Eventually? At least there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

She put her hand on his arm as he reached for the door handle. "I'm scared."

"About dinner?"

"No, about what this means between us. I kind of hate you because of what you did, but I also really like being around you. You settle something inside me. I know what it means, and I'm scared because I don't know if I can handle what's coming."

She swallowed hard and blinked at the sudden tears. He leaned over the console and pulled her close. She was immediately enveloped in his dark scent, and the tears eased away as quickly as they had come.

"I don't know what's coming for you either, Cinder, but I know I'm not going anywhere. Whatever comes, I'm there."

She pressed her face into his neck and slid her arms inside his jacket to feel the heat of his skin through the silk dress shirt. "I'm not going to apologize for being pissed at you for what you did."

"I didn't ask you to," he said with a chuckle. "Let's have dinner and then we'll see where the night takes us."

* * * * *

By the time dinner was finished, Adam was head over heels for Cinder. She was amazing. More than once during dinner his conscience had been pricked over how he'd taken her two closest friends from her. She was a stranger in Northern Ohio, and he'd pulled from her the most important people in her life. Not that he planned to let her hang out with those unmated males anytime soon, but he still felt bad.

They shared a tiramisu, and he told her about the pack's full moon

gathering. “The town has been the pack’s territory for generations. No one hunts in the woods but us. We have pack members working in most every business, from city hall to the police force to the diner.”

“Do females hold rank in the pack?”

“No. The females are led as a group by the alpha female, but of course everyone, including her, is under the authority of the alpha.”

Adam watched as she stirred the spoon in her coffee and looked thoughtful. She was so beautiful. He loved her golden hair and wanted to sink his fingers into it and see if it was as soft and as thick as it looked. Her green eyes shimmered in the candlelight, and her lips were just begging to be kissed.

“What if I can’t be the *Sahri* for the pack because I shift this full moon?” Her teeth dug into her lower lip.

“We haven’t had a *Sahri* since Lit left. His mate was Wiccan. If you really are going to shift this full moon, then you’ll need to concentrate on that alone. Until you’re ready to be the *Sahri* for the pack, we will do without.”

“Someone else from the coven–” she spoke, but he stopped her with a soft snarl.

“I don’t want anyone else to be the *Sahri* but you.”

She smiled and it warmed him from the inside out. The physical pull of their mating was difficult to ignore, but it wasn’t only because of the physicality of their bond as mates. He flat-out liked her. She was witty and sarcastic, generous to her friends. She probably didn’t realize that when they mated, the pack would become her family. Not for the first time, he wondered just how much she knew about wolves and whether she truly understood what becoming his mate meant. He wanted to tell her everything and mate with her immediately. The alpha in him demanded his female was by his side at all times. But worry over pushing her away by coming on too strong held him back. It was only because he felt her softening toward him that he resisted *bulldozing* over her life and forcing her to bend to his will. He didn’t *want* to force her. He wanted her to come to him because she didn’t want to be with anyone else, ever.

He stood and held out his hand to her. She took it immediately, and the connection between them flared once more. It felt as though they’d been holding hands for years when she linked their fingers together and walked with him through the restaurant. They only let go of each other for seconds as they got into his SUV and headed to Lykos.

He could have walked her into the club through the back and whisked her right to his private table, but he could admit to a bit of masculine pride at wanting to show her off. She was gorgeous, in the almost too-tight dress that showed most of her short but shapely legs. He slipped his arm around her as they walked down the sidewalk in front of the club, past the humans and other shifters who were hoping to gain admittance.

"Welcome, Alpha," Grey, a bouncer and pack member, said as he unhooked a black velvet rope and stepped aside.

Adam nodded as he ushered Cinder through the open doors and into the club. As the long line outside suggested, Lykos was packed. Strobe lights and lasers painted the crowd as they danced and writhed together.

"This way, sweetheart," he said into her ear as he led her around the perimeter of the dance floor to his private table. His table was in the back of the club in the center of the wall. The horseshoe-shaped booth had soft leather padding on the seat and circled a round wooden table. The booth was partially obscured in darkness thanks to carefully arranged lighting, so in a sea of bodies, it felt relatively private.

Cinder paused in front of the table, her fingertips brushing against the smooth surface. "I think you promised me dancing," she said.

Removing his jacket, he laid it on the seat and held out his hand to her once more. She took it, a beautiful smile lighting her face, and he swept her into the crowd to dance the rest of the night away.

* * * * *

Cinder had thought Adam was charming during dinner. He listened to her as if every word she spoke held hidden mysteries of the universe. And then he'd danced with her until she thought she'd combust from being so close to him. He'd held her tight with his arms wrapped around her, and they'd played a few hours' worth of grinding-pelvis, which left her throbbing and tingling by the time they were ready to call it a night.

Adam watched her unlock her apartment. He had surprised her by not inviting her back to his place, considering he'd asked his sister to invite her twice.

As if reading her mind, he said, "You asked me to give you time to get to know me. The clock is running down on the full moon, but I can

give you *some* time."

She leaned against her closed door. "What's going to happen?"

He rested his hand on her neck, and his thumb stroked her pulse. "I don't know."

"No, I mean aside from whether I shift or not. Doc mentioned something about…how the alphas get together."

She felt her cheeks heat and Adam chuckled lasciviously.

"Let's cross that bridge when we get to it, okay?"

"No. No bridge crossing without advance warning."

He glanced around and said, "Let's table this discussion for tomorrow, sweetheart. I don't particularly want to discuss *bridges* out in the open like this."

"Thank you for dinner."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. Did you have a good time?"

"I did. I hope you did too."

He placed his hands on either side of her head against the door and leaned forward. "I did. You're amazing, and I'm crazy about you."

Her heart stuttered a little at his confession. Hooking her hands over his arms, she tilted her face, silently asking for a kiss. He didn't hesitate, pressing his lips to hers. They'd kissed from time to time while they were dancing, but this was different. She could feel the heat of his body as he leaned closer, and the wild scent of him intensified. His tongue swiped at the seam of her lips, and she opened willingly, unable to stop the moan of pleasure when their tongues slid against each other.

She felt the muscles in his arms grow taut, and there was a sound of metal creaking. He lifted from her lips with a soft growl and said, "You said I was dangerous, sweetheart. Your kisses are addictive."

They hugged and kissed once more, and she turned to open her door and saw several dents in the metal where his fingers had made impressions. Looking over her shoulder, she raised her brow and he shrugged with a smile.

Shaking her head with a chuckle, she said goodnight and walked into her apartment. After turning the deadbolt, she walked to the window overlooking the parking lot and watched him walk to his SUV. He stopped before getting inside and looked up at her. She smiled and waved, watching until he was gone.

Part of her wanted to call him and ask him to come back and stay

with her. But she knew without a doubt that if he came into her apartment tonight, they'd have sex, which would probably be the most amazing sex of her life, but then what would happen? He was being *docile* and letting her have time to know him. It wasn't only the whining wolf in her head that wanted to roll over and show him the goodies. Cinder had never felt so strongly about a man so quickly. Sure, she'd been attracted to Cyrus and to Leo, but she'd known deep down that what she had with them was nothing more than fun.

Walking back to her bedroom, she looked at the door to what had been Cyrus's former room. It had made her incredibly sad learning he'd moved out, but it didn't sting so much now. Adam had done something rash, but she suspected he was jealous and had reacted. She wouldn't want an unrelated female living with him either. She frowned, thinking about what Angie had said about she-wolves being thrilled to be mated to Adam. She wondered how many females he'd been with. The wolfy part of her snarled in anger, wanting to go to the pack and threaten anyone who had ever touched him.

Shaking her head at the bossy wolf in her mind, she unzipped the dress and dropped it into the hamper, trading her sexy dress for a comfortable sleep shirt. She didn't want to shower, because she could still smell Adam, as if his scent were cologne that had been rubbed all over her. After climbing into bed, she pulled the covers over her, closed her eyes, and sleep quickly overtook her.

She found herself standing in dark woods. The moon was obscured, but she felt the full moon in spite of the darkness. Something cracked loudly behind her, and she turned and moved in that direction. She'd never been in these woods before, she was sure, but she had no trouble navigating around the large trees. A flickering flame came into view, and she walked toward it. Another crack sounded, this time followed by a grunt of pain. Immediately, she recognized Adam's voice and ran toward the flame.

She skidded to a halt inside a cleared circle. A bonfire blazed brightly in the center, and a group of men stood watching as a tall man took a thick branch from inside the bonfire and laid the burning end against Adam's bare stomach. Adam was chained to a pole near the fire, and as the flames burned his stomach, he grunted and jerked the chains, making the pole crack under his strength. The men watching howled in encouragement. She screamed and tried to rush forward, but something held her in place.

The wolves parted, and she watched an older male pulling a woman behind him with a chain. She gasped in shock to realize that she was watching *herself* be pulled, and the chain was attached to a thick

collar around her neck. She was naked, her body bruised and bleeding from what resembled whip marks. The male wound the chain around his hand, pulling her closer. He shoved his hand between her legs, and she whimpered in pain. He lifted his hand and it glistened in the firelight. Blood.

Adam roared in rage, but the sound died when a male grabbed Adam's head between his hands and broke his neck in a swift movement.

The man holding the burning branch turned slightly, and she recognized her father. He spoke to her as she was shoved to the ground by the male holding her chain. "This is what happens when you run. Disobedience will not be tolerated."

The wolves howled in approval. Cinder looked at Adam's body as it hung limply against the pole. She knew she was going to be raped, and she couldn't stop it. She pressed her hands over her ears and screamed.

She sat upright in bed, her voice cracking with the scream. She scrambled from the bed and looked around wildly, still certain she could smell the smoke of the bonfire and the scent of Adam's burning flesh. Her cheeks were wet with tears, and she couldn't stop shaking as she tried to convince herself it had been a dream. Except it hadn't really felt like a dream. She'd felt as though she'd been watching an event unfold, as if she were an observer. If it were a dream, she would have been in her own body, not watching herself be raped.

She stood on trembling legs and stumbled to the bathroom, turning on the light and splashing cold water on her face. She looked in the mirror, checking her body for the wounds she'd seen so clearly. Whip and claw marks, bruises from a beating. Her skin was clear and undamaged. Taking in a few deep breaths, she laid her hands on the countertop and stared at her reflection. Her eyes were gold. Gasping in surprise, she peered closer and watched as her natural green color seeped into the gold until only the green remained. Her heartbeat slowed and she felt herself losing the edge of panic that had ridden her since she'd woken up.

She stripped out of her sweat-soaked sleep shirt and stepped into the shower, turning on a lukewarm spray and letting the massaging pulse soothe her. After drying off and donning lounge pants and a loose shirt, she walked into the living room and flipped on the light. A tall bookshelf next to the window held her Wiccan books, and she trailed her fingers over the bindings until she found the one she was looking for.

Pulling the old, leather-bound book about dreams and visions from

the shelf, she pulled a fleece blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders as she settled in the recliner. Opening the book, she turned the pages, looking for something that would tell her whether she'd really had a crazy, frightening dream or if she'd actually witnessed an event that was going to come to pass in the future.

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Chapter 8

Cinder was waiting at the Wiccan store at eight a.m. on Saturday morning when Lorene showed up to unlock the front door.

She stared at Cinder for a long, silent moment and said, “What happened?”

Cinder had been up since three a.m., reading everything about visions and dreams. Her books all said that natural Wiccans could have the ability to see the future in their dreams, but it seemed to be up for debate on whether, once the future was shown, a Wiccan could change that future. She’d known in her heart that she needed to see Lorene and ask for help. The thought of Adam dying had filled her with such dread that she’d been unable to go back to sleep, obsessed with finding out whether or not her dream was going to come true.

“I need help,” Cinder said, tears welling in her eyes. “I think Adam’s going to die. I can’t let that happen.”

Lorene unlocked the front door and pushed it open. “I’ll call the corners, and you can tell us everything.”

Stepping into the store, Cinder inhaled the scents of herbs and old magic, and felt a little bit of calm seep into her. Lorene hustled behind the counter in the center of the store and picked up the phone and dialed, speaking quickly to each corner. After she placed the last call, she said, “Let’s make calming tea and sit in a blessing room. The corners will be here shortly, and we’ll get to the bottom of what is causing you such fear.”

Lorene wrapped her arm around Cinder’s shoulders and led her into one of the blessing rooms. By the time she held a cup of steaming tea, the corners had arrived. Cinder felt better being in their presence, but she still couldn’t shake the worry. She wondered, not for the first time, if she should have called Adam. But what could he do? He couldn’t divine the future; he could only comfort her. She was sure he would tell her that nothing would harm him and it had only been a dream.

“Tell us what is troubling you, sweet Cinder,” Bitty, one of the corners, said.

Cinder looked down at her lap, twining her fingers together. “Adam Beaumont believes I’m his alpha mate.”

“That’s wonderful news, is it not?” Idurre, the South Corner, asked.

Cinder chuckled mirthlessly. She told them about meeting him for the first time and how she’d almost died when Cyrus scratched her.

“He kept trying to push me to him, to force an interaction, and I was too angry to really see what was happening between us. I don’t pretend to understand what being an alpha wolf’s mate is going to be like, but I know in my heart that he’s mine and I’m his.”

Lorene sat down in a chair across from Cinder, joining the other corners at the large round table in the center of the room. “Why were you allergic to your tiger friend’s claws? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Doc Whalen said it was because I’m turning into a wolf. He said that because I’ve come into contact with Adam, that I’ll shift on the full moon.”

Gwen frowned. “How on earth can you shift? You’re well past the age when wolves shift for the first time, and I thought your father told you that you were all Wiccan and no wolf?”

“He did.” She shuddered as she remembered the way he’d watched as the older male raped her. She never wanted to see her father again.

“We’re missing something here,” Lorene said. “Tell us what’s troubling you so badly.”

Pressing her palms to her closed eyes to stem the flood of tears that threatened, she inhaled deeply and willed herself to calm down. “I dreamed that my father watched Adam be killed after he tortured him. I felt like I was watching a movie, but then I was also part of it.” She shared the dream, not sparing them any of the details.

Lorene rose from her chair and came around to Cinder, bending over and hugging her. Cinder clung to her and let the tears fall.

“Now, now, sweet child,” Lorene said as she lifted Cinder’s tear-stained face, “sometimes the goddess gives us visions so we can change what might come to pass. You’re powerful, and something unique is happening to you, but while that vision was grim, it doesn’t mean that it has to be the path of your life. Adam is a strong male. Why didn’t you go to him?”

“How could he understand a vision like that?”

“He might understand more than you give him credit for. The wolves have been in alliance with the Wiccans for centuries. He’s seen many supernatural occurrences that could not be explained in any other way than divine intervention. What if the vision you saw is because you shielded him from it? If he is your mate, then you need to tell him the truth and embrace what you are.”

“What am I? There’s a wolf in my head who is pushing me toward Adam, but my Wiccan nature wants me to stay here, to stay close to the coven and to the corners. I feel like I’m losing my identity.”

Idurre, Gwen, and Bitty rose from their chairs and joined them, putting their hands on Cinder. She felt the connection of the coven, that sweet old magic, flare with their touch, lifetimes of strong Wiccan power coursing through all of them. Just as swiftly as the connection flared, it shattered and Cinder cried out at the loss.

“I don’t understand,” Cinder said, feeling the loss of their presence as if they’d left her alone in the room.

Gwen said, “Something has changed in you, Cinder. Let’s find out what it is. Maybe in uncovering the truth of this, you will find the answer to your vision.”

The corners ushered her to the large stone fireplace. Logs sat on the grate, ready to be lit.

“State your power, child,” Idurre said from her right side.

“South and fire,” Cinder answered, her voice wavering as uncertainty bloomed in her.

“Call your power and light the logs,” Bitty said.

Cinder opened her mouth to voice her fear that something felt wrong inside her, but Lorene silenced her with a hand on her shoulder. “Do this first, and then we will see where you stand.”

Cinder shoved away the gnawing worry in her mind and concentrated on her power. Closing her eyes, she reached for her power, calling it to the surface to light the wood. She could see the flames in her mind, orange and yellow and red, licking across the dry wood, but she couldn’t make the wood light.

Her power, which had been like an extension of her body and something she could easily draw upon had changed, morphed into something she didn’t recognize and couldn’t use. She pushed further into herself, calling for her powers to heed her voice and to do her bidding, but nothing happened. Frustration shifted to rising anger, and she lifted her voice and chanted for the power of the flame to flow through her.

Her ears filled with a rushing sound, like fire licking a path through dry grass, but the sound changed until all she could hear was panting breaths and paws pounding on hard-packed earth. Her mind filled with the images of wolves – running, hunting, playing – and a wolf with golden fur rose onto its hind legs and shifted into a woman. Blonde hair spilled down her back like a golden waterfall, moving as she lifted her arms and chanted to the full moon. The wolves raced toward her, lifting their muzzles and howling to the sky, and one wolf, the largest of them all, shifted as he drew near the woman, and she knew it was Adam. He grabbed her around the waist, and her power flared bright and hot as the wolves howled their thanks.

The power inside Cinder writhed like a creature, twisting and turning. Howls filled her ears, louder and louder, until she clapped her hands over her ears and lashed out with her power to protect herself.

The vision in her head split apart like shattered glass, and a deep rumbling underneath her forced itself up from the depths. Her eyes opened as Lorene shouted, “Earthquake!” and the women threw their power over them for protection. The moment the corners laid their hands on Cinder, she screamed in pain, and the sound shifted to a howl that tore from her throat.

The room stopped shaking, and the corners breathed a collective sigh of relief. Clutching her throat as pain soared through her, Cinder looked at the women, and for the first time in her life, she felt completely and utterly helpless.

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Chapter 9

Adam hadn't been able to sleep, which wasn't anything new since he'd met Cinder. But last night had felt different. He couldn't explain it, but he was uneasy. As a male who prided himself on always being in control, he didn't like feeling as though he was walking a razor's edge with danger around the corner. At dawn he called Cinder's cell, but it went straight to voice mail. He'd called her three times and left three messages asking her to call him, but when she hadn't returned any of his calls, he decided to go see for himself whether she was okay or not.

Filling a mug with coffee, he looked out the kitchen window at the woods. The full moon was a short four days away. A lot could happen in four days. His wolf snarled. Cinder belonged in their home, safely under his roof. He'd been patient, but his patience had just run out.

His skin prickled and heat washed through him. The coffee mug slipped to the floor and shattered as he turned and faced his family and friends, who had suddenly gathered in the kitchen. Their eyes were glowing with the amber of their beasts, and fangs emerged from their parted lips.

A sharp pain seared through him, and he clutched his head, dropping to his knees as his vision went dark, feeling the sensation of falling. As quickly as he felt the air rushing around him, he was on four paws and racing through the woods. A wolf with golden fur raced next to him, and he instinctively knew it was Cinder in her shifted form. She was glorious as she ran beside him, the pack flowing around them as they tore through the forest. The pack howled and yipped happily as he and Cinder led them to the sacred circle in the center of their territory. She shifted into her human form with ease, and logs placed in the fire pit blazed to life as she turned and lifted her hands to the sky. The pack howled joyously, and Adam shifted and wrapped his arms around Cinder. Her skin glowed with power, and he felt the soul-deep connection to her as they embraced.

As quickly as the scene had appeared, it disappeared, and Adam found himself on his knees on the floor of his kitchen, with spilled coffee seeping into his jeans and the shards of the ceramic mug scattered around him. Six shifted wolves sat before him, their heads bowed in reverence.

"Holy fuck," he said, shaking his head. "I can't believe I didn't put the two together."

His father barked sharply, and Adam looked at him. "I know what she is now. She's not just my mate and the alpha female, she's something much greater."

Solan snarled in warning.

"I know that too," Adam said, understanding that his friend and packmate was worried. A knot of fear lodged in his spine. He stood and said, "I'm going to get her. As soon as you're able to shift, get the pack together. We have to protect our *lygisa*."

The wolves nodded, and Adam strode quickly up the stairs to his bedroom and changed into clean clothes. Then he grabbed his keys and headed outside as swiftly as he could. As the engine roared to life, he closed his eyes and willed his wolf to calm down and think clearly. He didn't believe Cinder was home. Although he wished she'd come to him, he could guess that she had gone to the coven this morning, and they'd done something magical, which had triggered his own vision.

He headed to the coven's store. As he drew closer to the store, he could feel his mate and her fear like it was something tangible. His wolf howled at him to comfort her, and more importantly to protect her.

He parked next to her car in front of the store and stormed into the building, not bothering to hide his annoyance that no one had called him.

"Cinder!" he bellowed her name and then heard her soft sob, causing him to quicken his pace. He found her standing in the corner of a library, trembling from head to toe.

It took him only a heartbeat to close the distance to her and wrap his arms around her. She melted against him, her tears wetting his shirt as she cried. She made a pained sound, and he cupped her face and lifted her chin until she met his gaze. Her eyes were golden, and slight fangs peeked from her parted lips.

Her voice was raw and soft as if she'd injured her throat. "I'm not me anymore."

He brushed his thumb along her bottom lip as tears leaked from her glistening eyes. "You are, sweetheart, I promise."

He lifted his head and looked at the Wiccans standing in front of a bookshelf stuffed with old books. Each of the four women held a book in her hands and stared at him with surprised expressions.

"Do you have any idea what happened?" he asked.

"Cinder's power changed. We don't know what happened, but we felt her connection to the coven disappear, and it was almost like something was trying to attack us. To protect her from us," Lorene said.

"She howled too," Gwen said, "and I think it hurt her throat."

Adam forced himself not to hold Cinder too tightly. He was enraged that the coven had interfered and hurt his mate. "You should have consulted me before you encouraged my mate to experiment with her powers."

Lorene frowned. "She is a member of my coven, Alpha. I couldn't possibly foresee what would happen. I still don't know."

Adam looked down at his mate, and she lifted her head and met his gaze. Fear sparked in the golden depths, but she wasn't trembling any longer. He felt her worry slowly fade as they remained connected. "She's no longer a Wiccan. She's a *lygisa*."

Cinder frowned as the other witches gasped.

Idurre said, "There hasn't been a known *lygisa* in centuries."

"My pack and I shared a vision earlier, of a wolf with golden fur. Cinder is that wolf. The power of the vision caused the wolves nearest me to shift."

Lorene laid her hand on her chest and closed her eyes. Adam felt Cinder stiffen, and she growled, but the sound cut off with a squeak of pain. He didn't know what Lorene was doing, but he quickly twisted his body and shielded Cinder. He felt something warm against his back, almost like a press of hot air, which he assumed was Lorene's power. Cinder relaxed slightly with a sob and buried her face in his chest. "Adam," she whispered.

"I'm right here, sweetheart."

He felt the warm press against his back recede, and he looked at Lorene as he turned to face her. "Don't do that again. It hurts my mate." He didn't want to harm the woman, but he would stop her by any means necessary to protect Cinder.

“I’m sorry, Cinder. I didn’t know.” Lorene moved gracefully to another bookshelf and ghosted her fingers over the bindings of the books.

Adam didn’t know what the books contained, but the whole room smelled old and musty. Lorene pulled a brown leather book from one shelf and brought it over. Adam, keeping one arm around Cinder to keep her firmly at his side, took the book. It felt cool against his hand and as thick as a phone book.

Lorene clasped her hands in front of her as she spoke, “This contains details of the last known *lygisa*. I don’t have to tell you how dangerous it is for her. Until she’s fully bonded and has claimed the mantel of her shift, she is vulnerable and in great danger.”

“Danger? From who?” Cinder whispered.

Adam growled darkly. “From any wolf pack that would seek to use your power for themselves.”

Lorene said, “Do you need anything for the ceremony? I can get you any supplies you need.”

“I’ve got everything. I hope you understand why Cinder won’t be coming back to work.”

Lorene nodded sadly. “I understand.”

“What?” Cinder asked, pushing away from Adam.

He didn’t let her get far, keeping his hand wrapped around her upper arm.

“Your power isn’t of the coven any longer,” Bitty said. “You’re not really a Wiccan anymore. You’re something unique and amazing.”

Lorene reached out and took Cinder’s hand. “This change should be celebrated, not mourned. We’re still your friends, but you can’t join us for ceremonies. Your power is too different.”

Adam could see that his mate was trying not to cry again, and he pulled her against him firmly and was glad when she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed tightly. “Let’s go home, sweetheart.”

Adam told the coven that he would send someone for Cinder’s car and belongings, and he said goodbye as he led his mate out of the store and to his SUV. His mind spun with a million thoughts at once as he climbed behind the wheel, laid the book in her lap, and turned on the engine. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove toward the pack’s territory.

Cinder was immobile next to him, and he twined his fingers with hers

and squeezed. Her hand was ice cold, and he looked at her to make sure she hadn't passed out from shock. He couldn't imagine how distressing it must have been to her to feel as though everything she'd known about herself had changed. The loss of the coven's closeness alone would have been difficult enough to handle without the curiosity that must be burning in her to know about the shift.

"I know your throat hurts because I heard the pained sound you made when you growled at Lorene. When I was fifteen, I had a really short temper and used to growl at everyone when they made me angry. Every time I growled, it was like a hundred knives twisting in my throat. My dad would call me an idiot and give me something to help with the pain. So I've been there, and I can help you feel better when we get home."

"Home?"

Her scratchy voice made his heart hurt. His poor mate. "To the alpha's home. My home. *Our* home."

She leaned against him, and he untangled their fingers and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She sniffled but said nothing, and he wasn't sure what to say to her anyway. The alpha in him wanted to berate her for not coming to him in the first place, but the male in him – the one who coveted her as his mate – didn't want to come down hard on her when she was in a fragile state. He wanted her to know she could trust him no matter what.

He parked in front of the house and got out of the SUV. He strode to Cinder's side and opened the door, lifting her into his arms. She hugged the book to her chest and put her free arm around his neck without protest. He was glad she felt safe with him.

His mom opened the door and bowed her head as Adam walked by with his mate. He carried her into the house, which was teeming with pack members. They parted quickly for him as he carried Cinder to the couch and set her down. Adam glanced at the wolves closest to the couch, his highest-ranked members. Although they appeared stoic, he saw the anxiety in their eyes and felt it through the pack's connection.

Adam knelt in front of his mate. Cinder still held the book with a white-knuckled grip to her chest. Her eyes were still golden, but the fangs had receded.

"Alpha," Angie's voice was soft and low as she came to stand next to him.

Adam glanced at her and found her holding a steaming mug. He took

it and turned the handle to Cinder.

“Sweetheart, it will help your throat.”

She grasped the handle with her free hand and the mug shook, so he steadied it and helped her bring it to her mouth. She winced as she swallowed. Her gaze roamed the room. He didn’t think she could feel the pack’s connection yet since they weren’t truly mated, but he hoped she felt some measure of comfort from their closeness.

He watched her take a few more sips, the pain etched on her features easing with each one. When she seemed to be able to drink without wincing and the trembling in her hand ceased, he straightened and looked at the pack.

“Brick, set up a perimeter. I want patrols around the clock until after the full moon.”

Brick nodded and called several names. Males followed him as he jogged out of the room. Adam looked for his mom and found her hovering nearby, wringing her hands in worry.

“Mom, Cinder’s car is at the Wiccan store. Take dad and a few of the females and go there and pack up her belongings. Lorene will help you get everything. Then go to her apartment and pack a bag.”

His mom smiled briefly and disappeared with Angie, his dad, and several females.

In only a few moments, most of the wolves were dispatched to various tasks and he and Cinder were left alone.

He sat down heavily next to her. “How’s your throat?”

She took one more drink and handed him the empty cup. “Better.”

He set it on the end table and turned to face her. “You must have a lot of questions.”

“I do. I don’t understand the vision or what happened to my power. What’s happening to me?”

He took the book from her and ran his hand over the leather cover. It was stamped with writing in a language he didn’t know. “*Lygisa* are – I guess the best description would be Wiccan-wolves. It’s a hybrid of sorts, a Wiccan who can shift, but the Wiccan power isn’t associated with the corners. It comes from the wolf side, so the power will feel more feral and raw to you than the Wiccan power you have always known. *Lygisa* are coveted. A pack with a *lygisa* would be invincible, unstoppable. Their territory would be protected with magic that could conquer anything.”

Her brow arched in mild disbelief. “If it’s so amazing, why did you say it was dangerous?”

“Not to us. Dangerous to you, sweetheart.” He exhaled slowly, trying to find the right words. “A *lygisa* isn’t like a full wolf. You’ll have the mantel of your shift and your powers, but you can only align yourself with one pack. Once you bond with a pack, your power is connected to that pack in a way that means you’ll never be free of them.”

She frowned, but he pushed forward before she could interrupt.

“You might feel an emotional connection to me as your mate, but that doesn’t mean that another pack can’t take you and make you their *lygisa*,” he explained. “If another pack were to take you and perform the bonding ceremony with you, you’d be their *lygisa,* and I wouldn’t be able to take you away. A *lygisa* can’t survive without her pack.” He looked at the book in her lap and ran his finger along the edge of the cover. He decided to be very blunt. “Up until the moment you perform the bonding ceremony, another pack could take you and perform the ceremony with you, whether you and I are mated fully or not. It would bind you to them irrevocably.”

She stared at him, her golden gaze seeming to see right through him. He could tell the moment when she fully understood what he had been trying to explain.

Her heart pounded and her mouth dropped open. “You mean a pack would force me through the ceremony and then watch their alpha rape me?”

He hated the way fear washed over her, a sour scent that made his wolf angry. “When I said it was dangerous for you, I meant it. There are alphas in the world who would do anything for the kind of power having a *lygisa* in their midst would give them. And you might think it’s cruel, but what female wouldn’t want a powerful creature to protect her pups and ensure that she’s safe from harm? There are many aspects about our kind that are good, but there are many that can seem evil or cruel.”

She stood so quickly the book dropped to the floor. “No! I don’t accept this at all.”

He picked up the book and laid it on the couch before standing in front of his mate. “You don’t have a choice.”

She blinked tear-filled eyes, and fat tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’m scared.”

“There isn’t anything to fear while you’re here with me, Cinder. I will keep you safe, and the pack will protect you with their lives.” He

pulled her into a tight embrace. She was rod-iron straight for a long moment before relaxing into him and gripping his shirt with her fists.

"Why me?"

"Because you're special."

"I'm not. I'm just a Wiccan."

"Not anymore. Whether you want this to happen or not, on the full moon you're going to become the *lygisa* of the pack and my mate in truth." He tipped her chin until she was looking at him.

"If I say no?"

He arched a brow. "Right now, the newness of your change in power is overshadowing everything, but I'll remind you that the full moon is only four days away. Each day, the connection between us as mates grows, and eventually, you won't be able to deny what's happening between us."

He dropped his face to the crux of her neck and licked her pulse. Her skin was warm, and he felt the thrum of her heartbeat against his tongue. Her arousal heated the air as she gasped his name when he gently bit her flesh. He knew he could push her arousal, seduce her quickly and overwhelm her so he could claim her as his mate, but he held back. He wanted her, more than he'd ever wanted another female in his entire life. If it were just a physical need, he wouldn't worry about her heart or her mind, but he didn't just want her body to agree to be his, he wanted *all* of her. He was a greedy son of a bitch.

He kissed the slight mark he'd made on her throat and, even though it was difficult, he pushed her gently away. Picking up the book, he placed it in her hands. She blinked passion-glazed eyes at him.

"Read the book and then come find me."

"Where are you going?" Her voice was rough and low.

"I need to check on some things, I won't go far. Don't leave the house for any reason, but you may go anywhere within it. It's your house now too."

He kissed her cheek and walked away, his wolf clawing in his head to go back and finish what he'd started with the bite.

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Chapter 10

Cinder wasn't sure how long she sat on the couch with the book in her hands, with her mind spinning, but when she eventually opened the book, she felt as though the whole world dropped away. She completely immersed herself in the story of a Wiccan named Rachelle who found her mate in a wolf named Jacque. Unlike herself, Rachelle had embraced her mate immediately, knowing that they were meant to be together. Jacque wasn't the alpha, but with Rachelle by his side, he took over his pack, and their power grew as the pack's territory stretched for miles. They became one of the biggest and most feared packs in North America. They lived for hundreds of years as alphas of their pack. The first half of the book was a biography of the couple, up until their lives ended, when, during a winter hunt, the pack left their territory when they were chasing deer and ran straight through the territory of grizzly shifters, who slaughtered them. Although Rachelle had been left at their home because of a pregnancy, she died when her mate and most of the pack died. A *lygisa* can't survive so much loss.

The last half of the old book contained spells to encourage communion between the wolves and their ancestors, concoctions to cure everything from morning sickness to food poisoning, and more than a dozen blessings tailor-made for a *lygisa* to share with her pack.

Cinder closed the book and laid her head back on the comfortable couch. Staring at the ceiling, she considered the changes in her life that had happened in such a short span of time. Overnight, her life had been ripped apart, great chunks of her identity strewn about, but she didn't feel as if she was still in pieces and she knew that was because of Adam. He aggravated her with his heavy handedness, but she also coveted his strength and confidence. He had known the moment he laid eyes on her that she was his mate. She'd been utterly clueless, and then, when faced with the truth, she had spurned him at every turn. He was an alpha and she wasn't giving him much respect.

Her fingers touched the mark he'd made. It was a shadow of what a

truemate marking would be, when he would sink his fangs into her throat. Her gums tingled at the thought, and she realized that she could bite him too. It wasn't a one-sided marking as it would have been before her powers changed. A giddy giggle bubbled up in her chest, and she couldn't help but smile. There was something altogether exciting about the thought of sinking sharp fangs into Adam Beaumont's flesh and making sure that no one else would ever touch him.

He's mine, she thought, and it didn't frighten her. She'd thought she was happy with the way her life was before, but she knew now that it was a shallow happiness, the difference between a babbling brook and a raging river.

A throat cleared, and she knew it was Angie before she lifted her head to look at her. "You're my future sister-in-law. Oh, wait, do wolves actually get legally married?"

Angie smiled and brushed a lock of dark hair behind her ear. "If they want to. Mating is more binding than a marriage. You can divorce someone, but you can't erase markings and the bond between two mates. I'm certain that Adam will want to marry you so you'll have his last name. We'll be packmates and sisters."

Cinder patted the couch cushion next to her, and Angie sat down quickly. "Talk to me about anything but *lygisa* and power, okay?" She put the book on the end table and turned her back on it. She wanted time to absorb what she'd learned before she talked to Adam. The vision she'd had of his death still hovered at the back of her mind, and her confusion concerning her new powers and everyone's belief that she would shift on the full moon was too much to dwell on.

"Um, what do you want to talk about?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

She shook her head. "We don't really do that."

"What, be boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"No, I mean be in a relationship with someone we aren't meant to be mates with. Wolves are either mates or they're not, there isn't a reason to date someone who isn't meant to be yours."

"So you've never had a boyfriend? What about dating? Have you gone out with anyone?"

"I dated some human boys in high school, but they weren't mine so it was just casual. There are males in the pack who I'm with on the full moon, but that's duty more than desire."

Brakes squealed in her mind. “What?”

Angie blinked bright blue eyes at her. “Unmated females have sex with unmated males on the full moon. The beasts are horny. We wouldn’t go out trolling for humans to fill that void. I don’t have to be with anyone I don’t want to be with, and it’s as much for my own needs as theirs, but…” her voice dropped off and her gaze traveled everywhere but to meet Cinder’s.

“But what?” Cinder encouraged.

She shook her head. “It’s too – I don’t want you to think less of me.”

“That’s not possible.”

“You won’t tell Adam?”

“As long as you’re not doing anything dangerous, I can keep what we say between us.”

Angie’s voice lowered to a whisper. “I don’t think my mate will be a wolf. I feel attracted to a certain type of male, but I don’t think Adam would approve.” After a brief moment, Angie continued, “I had a dream a couple years ago about being with two males at the same time. Wolves would never share their mate, so I know they aren’t wolves, and they bit me, but it wasn’t like a mating bite so much as the way certain supernatural creatures feed.”

She stared at Cinder intently and it took only a heartbeat before she put together what Angie was trying to say. Her future sister-in-law wanted to be in a ménage mating with two vampire males.

Holy crap!

Cinder’s mouth opened and closed a few times before she managed to say, “I don’t think vampires share either, hon.”

She shrugged. “I know what I dreamed. I don’t think it was a vision, but ever since that night, I haven’t really been happy with anything else. It all seems so ordinary.”

Cinder exhaled. “If you’re curious, one of my Wiccan friends lives with the coven. Her name is Arissa. She was really sweet to me when I first moved here, and although she lives at the club, she comes to the Wiccan store once a month. I could introduce you to her. Being with her would help to keep you safe. Shifter blood is addictive to their people, almost as much as Wiccan blood.” Cinder twisted her wrists and looked at the thin blue veins. “I don’t even know what to say about my blood now. A mix of both I guess.”

“Do you think Arissa would mind me hanging out with her?”

“I don’t see why not. You’re an adult, and you can make your own decisions about your life. Just be safe, no matter what you choose to do, okay?”

“I promise.”

They talked for a while longer, until Cinder’s stomach grumbled and Adam’s mom, who seemed to have sonic hearing, appeared with a tray of sandwiches. Other females came into the room, and they all shared the sandwiches and talked about the full moon and the pack. Cinder had always thought of the Wiccan coven as being her family, but the she-wolves included her so easily – as if she’d been there her whole life instead of hours, and she couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.

* * * * *

Cinder bolted upright with a scream lodged in her throat, thrashing wildly. Strong arms pinned her hands to a soft surface and a hard, warm body pressed over top of her. Panic screamed through her body, but it took only a heartbeat before she realized that it was Adam who covered her body with his own. As the roar of blood rushing in her ears subsided, she could hear him speaking softly and urgently.

“Calm down, sweetheart.”

She inhaled and the dark, woodsy scent of him filled her. Twisting her wrists, she linked her fingers with his and pressed her forehead to his collarbone.

“What happened?”

“I think you were having a nightmare,” he said, rolling off her body and twisting in the process until their positions were reversed.

She looked down at him. Moonlight streamed through the curtains, allowing her to see him clearly. Dark hair tousled from sleep, worry lines around his eyes and mouth. Letting her head fall farther down, she could see he was shirtless and a shift of her bare legs between his told her he was only wearing underwear. She pressed a kiss to the center of his chest.

He growled softly. “Sweetheart.”

She extracted her hands from his and bracketed his chest, levering herself over him with straight arms.

“You’re gorgeous.”

He chuckled. “Are you sure you’re awake?”

She lowered herself until she was hovering over one tiny brown nipple. Securing it between her teeth, she bit down gently and he groaned. She licked it, soothing the small pain, and straightened her arms again.

“I’m sure I’m awake.”

He cupped her cheeks and said, “You’re beautiful. I’m a lucky wolf to have you in my life.”

She settled herself on his chest, laying her head on her forearms. “I don’t know what I was dreaming about. Did I wake the whole house up?”

“Probably, but it doesn’t matter. I felt your terror before you actually screamed, so I was already on my way.”

He hadn’t been surprised earlier when she asked for a room of her own. She knew it was probably against every wolfy protocol to have the alphas sleeping in separate rooms, but they weren’t official mates yet and she still wanted some time to come to terms with what she’d learned.

“Thank you for coming for me.”

“I will always come for you, sweetheart.”

They lay in silence for a while, and she thought she might drift off to sleep again, but every time she shut her eyes, she was reminded of the dream she’d had of her father killing Adam and another male attacking her.

“Will you stay with me for the rest of the night?”

He moved so quickly she could only gasp at being suddenly in his arms as he strode from the room and down the hall to his own bedroom. He laid her gently on his bed and settled next to her without a word. She snuggled against him, wondering if she should tell him about her dream or just let it go. It might not be a vision. She thought about the wolves guarding the house tonight and all the pack members who were watching out for both of them and decided that she would tell him another day. Closing her eyes, she forced out of her mind the images of Adam dying and concentrated on the solid feel of his body as she snuggled closer.

* * * * *

She woke slowly from sleep, her body tingling and warm. She

wiggled in the bed and stretched, and she felt Adam move closer to her. One of his legs was between hers, his thigh pressing against her pussy, separated only by a thin scrap of lace. She opened her eyes and looked down to see her tank top pushed up to the bottom of her breasts and him kissing slowly across her stomach.

"Good morning to you too," she said, smiling, as she slid her fingers through his thick hair.

He licked around her navel, and her toes curled as shivers raced along her spine. "I woke up this morning with your hand cradling a very excited part of my anatomy."

Her mouth dropped open. She went up on her elbows. "You're joking."

He nudged her pussy with his thigh, and she could feel how wet she was.

"I'm very serious, sweetheart. You were draped over me like a blanket, and your hand was having a good time. I just wanted you to enjoy it as much as I was."

Her cheeks blazed. "I don't know what to say."

"For fuck's sake, don't apologize." He moved over her, caging her in with his arms and staring down at her. "Cinder," he growled her name, "be mine."

She placed her hands on his waist and stroked up his sides. "I thought we had to wait until the full moon."

"For your shift and for you to be *lygisa*, not to become mates. I want to mate you and mark you so that no one will even think of touching you."

She smiled. "I had that same thought earlier."

His eyes narrowed and he licked his lips. "I want my cock in your pussy and my fangs in your neck."

His hand moved slowly, and she saw the ends of his fingertips as they shifted into dark claws. Her top ripped easily as he sliced it apart, and her panties didn't stand a chance as he curled a claw around the delicate fabric and shredded it. He tossed the torn fabric aside. He glanced down at himself, and with two quick swipes of his claws, he shredded his boxer briefs and threw the fabric over the side of the bed. His claws receded and he cupped her cheek.

"This is stronger than human marriage, Cinder. When we mate, there's no going back to the world you knew."

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“I just want you to know how serious this is. It’s not about you being *lygisa*. It’s because I’m crazy about you and I can’t stand the thought of spending another night without knowing what you taste like and hearing you scream my name in pleasure.”

She curled her hands in his hair and drew him down to her lips. “I’m crazy about you too.”

Their lips met and parted, and the first slide of their tongues together made sparks light behind her closed eyes. He settled over her as they kissed, sliding one arm under her back to hold her close. She felt his hard cock as he settled into the cradle of her hips, and she wound her legs around him and hugged him close. While their tongues danced in a slow, seductive kiss, his hand traced light patterns up her waist to her breast. His thumb rubbed a circle around her nipple, and it tightened into a hard point, making her groan.

He sucked her bottom lip and bit gently, before kissing her chin and down the column of her throat. His tongue stroked along her collarbone while his finger and thumb pinched her nipple, sending a riot of sensations through her. She arched up and he plumped her breast with his hand and closed his mouth over her nipple. She released her tight grip on his hair and trailed her fingers down his neck and back. He was all thick muscle and silky skin. Lifting her head, she kissed his throat and captured some of his flesh between her teeth.

He released his hold on her nipple with a soft snarl and lifted from her, making her lose her hold on his neck. He kissed her other nipple, licking and sucking it until she couldn’t hold still, and then he kissed his way down her stomach. Her body tensed as he drew closer to her pussy, and the wolf inside her howled in happiness.

She giggled as he kissed the sensitive skin over her hip. He pushed her thigh open roughly, giving himself more room to settle between her legs, and he held her, splayed open, while he stared at her core. He glanced up the length of her body, meeting her eyes for a brief moment.

“Mine,” he growled, his eyes turning the golden amber glow of his beast.

He lowered his head, his hands tightening on her thighs as he held her open. He licked the length of her pussy slowly. His tongue flicked over her clit, and she gasped as he circled his tongue around her entrance with a throaty growl. Her pussy flooded with heat as he tongued her, her stomach clenching as he pushed her closer to the

edge of climax.

Her hands gripped the sheets as he focused his attention on her clit, flicking the tender bud rapidly with his tongue. She spiraled quickly to climax, but he eased the torment on her clit, gentling her with slow strokes that brought the flames of her pleasure to a low simmer. She reached for him, determined to shove his face into her pussy until she came. He released his hold on her thighs and pressed her hands to the bed with a growl. She wiggled under his intense gaze as he poised above her throbbing pussy.

"Adam, please," she whispered, trying to extract her hands from his grip.

He flashed her a grin, and she saw his fangs. The sight of them made her gums tingle. He lowered his head slowly, driving her insane with want. Just as she vowed in her mind to make him suffer the same wait for his own climax, he closed his lips around her clit and sucked the tight nub into his mouth, growling loudly. The combination of the vibrations from his growl and the heat of his tongue lashing her clit sent her over the edge immediately, white hot pleasure blinding her as she screamed her pleasure.

Adam slid up her body, kissing her twitching stomach along the way, until they were face to face. Her legs caged his hips, and she slid her trembling hands up his arms as his cock nudged her tingling entrance.

He breeched her, his thick cock stretching her as he pushed inside. She gasped as he powered into her. He seemed to go on forever, until finally, he was seated completely, their bodies joined as tightly as possible.

There was a brief moment when time seemed to stand still as they gazed at each other, and then he canted his hips and slid out of her. She moaned at the feeling of all that thickness leaving her as he pulled from her body slowly, paused only a heartbeat, and pushed back in. Each inch of him filled her once more, and she hooked her ankles together at the small of his back and gripped his shoulders and titled her hips. He snarled and captured her mouth with his as he began to move within her, their tongues dueling as his body staked a claim to hers.

Heat spiraled through her as they moved together, until he was taking her so hard she couldn't keep kissing him. Wrenching away from his mouth, the breath gusted from her mouth as she dug her nails into his flesh. She raked her nails down his back, her body tightening as pleasure poured over her.

"Adam!" she screamed.

She groaned as his cock thickened in her already sensitive channel. He growled as he came, and she felt the heat of his come filling her. She pulled herself closer to him as twinges of pleasure ebbed and flowed within her. She'd expected him to bite her, but he hadn't, and she didn't know what that meant.

She found herself suddenly on her stomach, with Adam pulling her against his chest as he kneed her legs apart. He gripped her tightly across her shoulders and nuzzled her head aside. His other hand slid down her sweat-soaked stomach, and his fingers grazed her clit.

"This is how we'll be on the full moon, my mate," he snarled the words, and she could feel his cock harden against her back as he spoke. Images flashed through her mind of them making love in front of the pack. The light of the full moon casting their bodies in pale blue as the pack watched, waiting for the shared pleasure he'd told her about.

She gripped his forearm, relaxing against him.

"Make me yours, Adam. I want it all. All of you, all of the pack. I'm not afraid anymore."

He kissed her neck tenderly, a soft growl in his throat. "Fly with me, Cinder," he whispered.

She closed her eyes as he began to rub her clit. The rough pads of his fingers drew her body back to life quickly. She tilted her hips, inviting him to do whatever he wanted to her, and he growled his approval. His fangs traced a light line up her neck, and her wolf howled in approval. Gasping as the first fingers of orgasm rolled through her, she shrieked in bliss as he sank his fangs into her flesh at the place where her neck and shoulder met. His growl vibrated through her body, and she cried out his name.

He shoved his arm in front of her, and she saw that he'd nicked his arm with his own fangs. The smell and sight of his blood made her fangs erupt. She buried her fangs in his arm, his blood cresting her tongue with a sweet, metallic tang. As she lifted from him, she felt her skin prickle as her wolf rolled under her skin.

He laid her upper body on the bed and sank his cock into her pussy, fucking her hard and fast as her climax twisted through her. Each stroke of his cock hit a place inside her that made her vision wink out. She buried her face in the pillow and screamed. Adam curled his hands around her hips and pounded into her until the center of her body turned to molten lava and she thought her heart would pound out of her chest. She'd never been part of such pleasure before as Adam came inside her with a howl of bliss and lowered himself to

blanket her with his warmth.

He growled, the sound heartfelt. “Mine.”

She turned her head. “Yours.”

Too blissed out to move under her own power, she let him pull her onto his chest as he rolled to his back. She could taste him on her tongue and still feel the pinch of his fangs as they marked her. She felt completely connected to him now and smiled as she drifted off to sleep, safe in his arms once more.

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Chapter 11

The day before the full moon, Adam was working with pack members to finish the items needed for the bonding ceremony. As a pup, he'd done a lot of full moon preparation, handling the grunt work for the adults. He'd swept the clearing free of debris and cut wood for the fire until his arms ached so badly he thought they'd fall off. He'd been glad when he was old enough to fight for rank and not have to do that work anymore, but there was something very satisfying about preparing ceremonial items for his mate.

The ceremony itself was simple, but it was steeped in powerful magic. Cinder would have full use of her new power once the ceremony was complete. He liked knowing that she would be able to help keep the pack safe, but what he appreciated even more was that she would be nearly invincible herself. A *lygisa* was extremely difficult to kill, and although a *lygisa* could die from the heartbreak of losing her pack, Adam didn't foresee that happening. His pack was the only one in Northern Ohio, and they had a cadre of other shifters around to support them. He'd never called on any of the other shifters for anything more than a casual favor, but he knew if an enemy came up against them that he'd have tigers, bears, dragons, falcons, and white lions at the ready to help defend their territory. The only creatures he'd never planned to contact for help were the vampires. Although the pack and vampire coven had an alliance, he didn't care for the blood drinkers. They smelled strange to him, like dust and dried blood. Fortunately, he didn't have reason to be in contact with the coven and didn't ever plan to be.

Adam turned his attention back to the branches of the white ash tree he was twisting together. White ash, a native tree of the area, had been part of his pack's special ceremonies for generations, usually reserved for ceremonies inducting newly shifted young wolves into the pack as full members. White ash was strong and adaptable, and with the underside of the leaves being white, it reminded wolves of their dual nature. The twisted branches, held together with thin wire, would be used in the ceremonial fire, added to represent Cinder's

duality – she was both the protector of the females as their alpha and the protector of the pack as their *lygisa*. His thoughts kept drifting to his mate. He could feel her in the house, and just knowing she was there made him happy. He was falling hard for her, and it had little to do with her beauty or the power that he could already feel coursing through her. She was sweet and loving, kind and generous. The females had taken to her immediately, so desperate for a leader of their own. Although Cinder would always be accountable to Adam as the alpha male, she would be the go-between for the females and handle their issues herself. He'd found her meeting with the females in the living room, learning about them and their roles within the pack, more than once during the last few days. Angie had confessed last night to telling Cinder about the role of unmated females in relieving the sexual needs of unmated males on the full moon. Cinder had confronted him later about her dislike for the process, but it was one of those aspects that wasn't going to change.

"There's no force, Cinder. If a female doesn't care for a male, she doesn't have to fuck him."

She made a face. "Do you have to be so crude?"

Shaking his head, he snagged her around the waist and drew her close. He loved how she sighed softly whenever their bodies touched, even fully clothed. "They're not making love, sweetheart. Unmated males can get overly aggressive without sex on the full moons, and the females are sensitive to that. I guess you'd say there's a desire on the females' part to help them because they know that restless, agitated wolves can be dangerous."

Her brow arched. "You're saying that the unmated females feel sorry for the males being all horny and unfulfilled and just roll over for them?"

"Now who's being crude?" he asked, kissing the space under her ear where her slowly changing scent called to him. Before she began to change as their *lygisa*, she'd smelled sweet to him, but now, that scent was bathed in the woodsy fall scent of wolves and another scent he couldn't quite place – like candles being lit and the crisp scent of night on the full moon. She smelled like a single flower blooming in the woods, with a shaft of moonlight highlighting its beauty.

"I'm just saying I don't want any of my females feeling obligated to *do* any of the males. They can date their right hands if they're feeling horny."

He stared at her in shock for a long moment and then laughed. "It's a wolf thing, Cinder. You'll feel it for me too. There's an inherent need

within wolves for everyone to be content, and, yes, you might think that males are getting the better deal when it comes to sex, but the females benefit too. It brings the pack closer. A well-satisfied male is better able to hunt on the full moon, to protect if necessary."

She still looked skeptical. "Do other shifter groups have this sort of thing?"

"I don't know. It's not exactly dinner conversation." He kissed the tip of her nose and released her. "No one is being forced. If a female wants to say no, then she can and she should. It's as simple as that."

Something slowly dawned in her eyes, and she asked, "So you've been with all the unmated females outside of your family?"

He met her eyes. The green was slowly swirling to amber as her lip curled and a soft snarl erupted from her throat.

"You already know the answer to that."

She growled sharply. "You're mine!"

"I know." He pulled her over to the couch and sat, tugging her into his lap. She curled up immediately against him, snuggling close. "Yes, I've had sex with the unmated females. The wolf has a strong desire to mate, especially on the full moon. It's hard to ignore, and there was never any reason for me to do so. When I moved up the ranks, the females came willingly to offer themselves to me."

"Even though you weren't their mate?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Some wolves never find their truemates, and after a while, the desire to have a pup and start a family is stronger than the desire to be with the one meant for them. A female might decide it would be better to be with the alpha than to be alone, and some females are very power-hungry and only want to be with the strongest males. That's also an ancient desire. Finding the most powerful male and hooking up for protection and status."

"What if a wolf feels a mate connection to another species?"

"Like another shifter?"

"Sure, or a human or some other supernatural creature."

"Then they would be with them."

"Are they still part of the pack?"

"Why wouldn't they be?" He frowned, tipping her chin until he looked into her eyes. "Is someone mating with another shifter?"

"No, I was just asking. I didn't know if the pack was exclusive, like if a male or female mated another supernatural creature then they'd

have to leave the pack."

"Pack members can mate with whoever they choose, sweetheart. Other shifters would be welcome to hunt with the pack, but humans and non-shifters wouldn't. The pack isn't exclusive, but some aspects of pack life are."

She hummed lightly and rested her head on his shoulder. "I just want the females to be happy."

"They are, I promise."

"I don't want to disappoint them or do a bad job."

"You're already an amazing alpha and you haven't even gone through the ceremony yet," he pointed out.

"I have a good teacher," she whispered before kissing his neck.

Later they made love, and he couldn't say it was anything less than love because he felt so connected to her. He felt as though their hearts were beating as one. Which sounded incredibly cheesy in his head, but it was still the truth.

"Adam?" Brick said his name, drawing him back from his thoughts to the present.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked, twisting a wire around the end of a bundle of ash branches.

"The oil's gone rancid."

"What?" He set the finished bundle on a small tarp with the other bundles he and some of the wolves were making and stood, joining his cousin on the back patio where a container of anointing oil sat open. Even from a distance Adam could smell that the oil had gone bad.

"Well, shit."

"I'm sorry. I called the Wiccan store, and they're out, but they gave me an address of another store. They don't deliver, so I'm going to pick it up. I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks for handling it." He clapped Brick on the shoulder.

"It's my pleasure. My wolf is happier than he's been in a long time, and it's because of Cinder. I can already feel how much stronger our pack is with her in our midst, and she hasn't even fully claimed her power."

Just then, Cinder raced out of the house with a sharp cry of alarm. Her eyes were bright gold and her fangs were elongated. Adam grabbed her, feeling her panic.

“What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s hurt, in the woods!” she panted, her chest heaving as if she’d run a marathon. “I can feel the pain. It’s one of the females.”

He opened himself to his wolf and the connection to the pack and felt nothing, at first, but then he slowly began to sense panic and pain, but he couldn’t detect the direction.

Cinder struggled in his grasp. “Let me go. I have to help her.”

“Not alone,” he said.

She nodded in agreement. Adam barked instructions to the wolves around him, and within minutes, they were following an agitated Cinder into the pack’s territory. She strode with purpose through the trees. She stopped suddenly and lifted her head, inhaling deeply.

“What is that?” she asked.

He inhaled and smelled nothing but the woods. “What do you smell?”

“I don’t know. It smells like sulfur, like lit matches or fireworks.”

She took a few steps away, sniffing the air loudly, and he would have remarked on how adorable she looked if he hadn’t been so worried about why they had walked nearly to the edge of the territory.

A mist rose from the ground, and the wolves around him grunted in surprise. It was dense like fog but had a strange scent to it. Dread settled over him as he realized that there wasn’t anything natural about the fog that was surrounding them quickly.

He reached for his mate, but she was suddenly pulled away, her scream of surprise cut off as the fog rolled around them like boiling water and obscured their vision. He snarled, reaching his hands out and in front of him, desperately searching for her.

As quickly as the fog had risen, it began to recede, and he found himself with his wolves in the woods, no trace of his mate.

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Chapter 12

Cinder choked as the fog covered her body and filled her mouth, the sulfur scent making her gag. She tried to scream, but something was tied around her mouth. The gag was made of thick fabric that tasted sour like rotten milk and made her want to retch. Rough hands quickly bound her wrists, and she was upended over someone's shoulder. The sound of air rushing by filled her ears as the person carrying her ran far faster than a human. Branches slapped at her, and she felt their sting even through her clothes. She tried to scream again, trying to work the awful tasting fabric out of her mouth, or slice it with her fangs, but her fangs seemed to have disappeared. She felt as though the fog had seeped into her skin. Her eyes burned and her heart pounded in her ears. She struggled to stay awake, but she was being pulled into darkness too fast to stop herself from being overwhelmed.

She was aware of everything and then nothing.

* * * * *

Setta smiled as she lowered the disorienting fog. She had glamoured herself with foliage, blending in perfectly with the woods around her. The stupid *lygisa* had fallen for her trap so easily that she wondered why her master had even bothered with something as complicated as spell casting. The *lygisa* had been unable to tell that Setta had been watching her because she was so confused by the changes happening to her. She had also not known that Setta had been invading her dreams a few times to give her glimpses of what her future held.

The injured she-wolf whimpered at Setta's feet. She'd sealed her mouth and bound her in magic, but not the nice kind of magic that the foolish *lygisa* could use. Setta used dark magic. The kind that turned an unsuspecting sister of the alpha out running errands into a writhing ball of pain.

Setta flicked her finger over the female, and a piece of her skin shredded as if cut by an invisible knife. She shrieked in agony, and Setta inhaled the scent of her pain. Rubbing her sides in a sensual way, she thought she might just hurt the female a few more times before turning her over to her master for her swiftly coming death. Of course the master would play with her a bit first, too, but maybe he'd let Setta help.

She felt her master call for her through their mental link, and she sighed. No more fun for her right now. Reaching down with her power, Setta lifted the female off the ground, and the she-wolf whimpered in fright, which only made Setta smile. Once upon a time, she'd been an innocent Wiccan, content to share her power with her coven, and then she'd gotten a taste of dark magic, and she hadn't wanted to go back to being pure and good. It was much more fun to be bad.

A clawed hand flew through the fog and snagged Setta around the neck. Thick claws dug into her flesh, and she struggled, gasping for air as she was lifted off the ground. The she-wolf crashed to the ground next to her. Setta was pulled through the fog by the clawed hand until she was nose-to-nose with a half-shifted, pissed off wolf. His mouth was elongated into a fur-covered muzzle complete with glistening, deadly teeth. His eyes were such a bright amber that they momentarily dazzled her.

She knew who he was without an introduction. Adam, the alpha and mate of the Wiccan.

"How?" she wheezed. There was no way the wolf should have been able to find her through the fog.

He snapped his jaws at her, and she tried to shrink away, but he held her immobile. Her chest burned as he squeezed her throat and the oxygen was cut off.

"Where is my mate?" He snarled the words.

She stared into his eyes and could see her own death. She struggled to find her power, but because she was surrounded by the alpha, she couldn't reach her dark magic. How was he stopping her?

The fog dissipated as she weakened further, and she found herself in the company of a pack of pissed off wolves.

"I'll never tell," she gasped, reaching into the pocket of her jacket for a knife.

Her wrist snapped as the alpha stopped her from closing her fingers around the hilt, and everything slipped into darkness.

* * * * *

Adam pulled the knife from the witch's pocket and tossed it to Brick. He sniffed at her, and his nose wrinkled as the heavy scent of sulfur stung him.

The fog was gone, and so was Cinder, but his sister, surprisingly, was on the ground, seeming to be bound by something that was invisible to the naked eye.

Adam dropped the witch to the ground and knelt down next to Angie, brushing the back of his knuckles over the strange, clear covering on her mouth. She was panicking, her eyes wide with fear. "Calm down, Angie. The witch is out of commission. You're safe now."

He looked up at Solan. "Call the coven to help Angie."

He picked up the unconscious witch and tossed her over his shoulder. "I'm going to find out what happened to Cinder."

Brick said, "Do you want us to search the woods for her?"

Adam shook his head. "She's not in our territory any longer. I can't feel her at all. This one will tell us what we want to know. I'll make sure of it." He paused and looked behind him. "Sweep the woods for intruders. Figure out how this one got through the patrols and how Angie was taken."

Brick nodded. A few wolves followed Adam, and he knew they were watching his back. The strange female bumped against his shoulder blades as he walked with purpose through the woods. Somehow, she'd captured Angie and gotten into Cinder's conscious mind to pull her to their location. The disorienting fog had effectively hobbled him, but when he heard her scream, he'd partially shifted and immediately scented a strange presence. If he hadn't, he might not have known that Angie was taken or who was behind Cinder's disappearance.

He was furious that Cinder had been taken. He didn't know how, but someone had figured out that she was a *lygisa*. He was as sure of that as he was that the moon would rise tomorrow.

He cleared the woods and turned to the right, where a large barn sat away from the house. His father stood next to the open door. "What do you need from me?"

"Watch the door. There's going to be a lot of screaming."

The door slammed shut and Adam walked to the center of the concrete slab that comprised the floor of the barn. In the center of the room, a bare light bulb swung lazily, casting shadows along the roughhewn walls. He dropped the witch to the concrete non-too-gently, and after extracting a length of cord from a storage shelf, her tied her up and hung her from a hook in the ceiling.

Turning to a large sink in the corner, he filled a bucket with cold water and carried it to the still unconscious woman. Hate filled him. He wanted to gut her for her part in Cinder's abduction. And maybe he would later. But right now, he needed answers more than he needed vengeance. Willing his wolf to heel, he returned to his normal fully human form and tossed the water on the woman.

She came to with a screech of pain and found herself hanging by her wrists, which had to be mind-numbingly painful considering one of them was shattered; her feet dangled above the ground.

"Talk."

* * * * *

Cinder woke slowly. She opened her eyes and found herself staring at chain-link fencing, and beyond that, a water-stained ceiling. She blinked away the blurriness, lifted her hands, and found them bound in front of her.

Her mind raced. She'd been in the woods with Adam, certain she'd felt a she-wolf injured in the woods, and then she'd been attacked and taken away. She closed her eyes and reached for her powers, but whatever *lygisa* power she had was gone.

She heard footsteps and she turned her head.

It couldn't be.

Her father stopped and stood a few feet away from what she realized was a cage, the sort that was used in dog kennels. The room was empty except for the cage. The walls were bare and the windows were boarded up. He stared at her blankly, his eyes roaming over her as if she were a piece of meat for inspection.

There was coldness in his gaze, and it chilled her to the core. The nightmare she'd had surfaced quickly. She'd never told Adam, deciding that she was safe within the alpha house and that it hadn't been a vision. But she couldn't deny the clarity that spiked through her. She'd made a terrible mistake.

Her father looked over his shoulder as another male entered the room through the only door. He was tall and lean, his face aged with time and a hard life. She fought screaming in terror as the male of her vision, the one who had pushed her roughly to the ground and violently claimed her, strode toward her with purpose. He knelt next to the cage, his yellow teeth showing as he grinned.

"Such a pretty thing. You'll make nice meat for the pack. Wouldn't you say, Roscoe?"

The alpha looked at her father. He smiled in a way that was far too lascivious for a father to look at his daughter and horror filled her. She could get away. She *had* to. The whole pack was evil. She could smell it on them – that strange sulfur smell that she'd scented in the woods. She shouted for her wolf to help her, but everything inside her felt heavy, as if her power was blanketed somehow.

"Aw, she's scared. Funny," the alpha said. He wiggled his fingers through the links, taunting her. "Don't worry, little girl. You'll come to love your place in the pack, casting spells against our enemies and spreading your legs for anyone I choose." He rattled the cage, and she squeaked in alarm, which only made him chuckle. "Enjoy your last few hours of freedom. When the moon is in its arc tonight, we'll force your power to rise now instead of waiting for tomorrow. It'll be my pleasure to usher you into our pack by blood and flesh." He stood and turned his back on her. "You can release her if you wish, or don't. It matters little to me if she's comfortable now. It's a good lesson to learn for her future."

The alpha left, and she was alone with her father. Except she wouldn't call him that anymore. He didn't deserve the title.

Something glinted in his eyes, as if he knew what she was thinking. A small smile curled the corner of his mouth, but he said nothing. Turning slowly, he left her alone. The door shut, and she strained her ears to hear anything, but either there was no one around or the walls were well insulated.

Panic clawed at her, but she pushed it away. If she fell apart, she wouldn't survive, and she knew she needed to live. She had to keep her head together and figure out a way to free herself. She called for Adam, pushing against the wolf in her mind that felt as though it was asleep. She'd been feeling so connected to Adam until now, as if they were one being and not two. Now, all she felt when she thought of him was nothingness. But it felt like less than nothing, like the absence of all they'd been together.

She tugged the gag free. Closing her eyes, she sorted through her

mind for something she'd read in the *lygisa* book that would help her. She wasn't a true Wiccan anymore, but at one time, she'd harnessed the power of the flame. Her fingers tingled as she thought about her south power. She hadn't experienced a connection to her Wiccan power since that fateful day when she'd changed completely, and Adam had come for her. But now, she could feel the heat in her fingers as her nerves snapped with energy.

Whatever had been done to her wolf and *lygisa* powers had allowed her Wiccan powers to return, at least in a small way. Concentrating on the feel of heat that spread down her fingers, she spoke the words of a simple, familiar spell. Her power swelled, and her hands began to burn. She ignored the scent of singed flesh and wiggled her fingers, trying to grasp pieces of the rope to burn them.

Screaming inwardly as her flesh seared with the heat of her power because she was unable to throw her power anywhere, she focused on the ropes and watched them loosen and finally give way. Sweat dripped from her brow as she shook out her hands and the power receded. Her hands were red and raw, her fingers blistered and swollen, but she was free.

She'd read once about a Wiccan who could reach her coven by focusing her power and slipping into a sort of meditative state. Closing her eyes, she let the Wiccan power flare to life again as she reached out to her former coven. She didn't know if it would work, but she hoped it would. She didn't know how much time she had left.

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Chapter 13

Adam snarled when the barn door opened, but reigned in his wolf when he saw Lorene and the corners. She stumbled as she walked and pressed her hand to her nose. "She stinks of evil."

All four women covered their noses and gagged. Adam had gotten used to the scent, along with the metallic tang of blood and the sound of the witch's screaming.

"You're supposed to be helping my sister."

"We did, and she's fine," Lorene said. "But we smelled something awful and followed it here. Your father asked us to wait until you were done, but we need to be part of this."

"Don't ask me to give her mercy," Adam said.

Gwen's eyes blazed with indignation. "Who said anything about mercy? She's given herself over to black magic. Her soul is tarnished. She can't be redeemed."

The witch screamed and kicked her legs. Blood droplets flew through the air before splattering on the floor.

"She won't talk. She wants to die," Adam growled.

"She'd probably be killed by whoever gave her the power," Idurre said. "A better choice to die now than at the hands of the one she would betray."

Lorene hummed. "She doesn't have to be willing to share what she knows."

Adam stepped back as the four women circled the witch. Immediately, the witch screamed a string of words that sounded like a spell. The Wiccans held hands and something shimmered around them, like the heat of invisible flames. The witch fell silent, and her eyes rolled back in her head until only the whites showed.

"I'll force the moon to bloom tonight," she rasped in an otherworldly voice. "The *lygisa* will claim her power, and the pack will have her."

The Wiccans raised their arms slowly, and the witch began to shriek as her body jerked. Then she fell limp as the Wiccans chanted. The barn became stiflingly hot as the air shimmered again. They dropped their hands and stepped away.

Lorene turned slowly, and her eyes were electric blue and glowing. "I see Cinder in a cage. She reached out with her Wiccan power and touched us when we called the corners to bind the evil one. She's in a house one hundred miles from here."

She bent over and wrote the word *Rexton* and the number seven in the witch's blood on the concrete. Straightening, she blinked several times, and the glow faded from her eyes. The other Wiccans surrounded her as she weakened at the knees and they caught her.

"What is Rexton seven?" Adam looked past them to the witch who was completely still save for the rise and fall of her chest.

"The street and house number," Lorene said.

Hope bloomed in his chest. "I thought her Wiccan power was gone because she's a *lygisa*? How could you see her?"

Lorene looked over her shoulder with a sneer. "Whatever this one did to her, it covered up what makes her a *lygisa*, and enough of her is still pure Wiccan that she was able to pull that power to her use. But there's a bigger problem, Adam. She said she was going to force the full moon tonight."

"*She's* not going to do anything." He turned his attention away from the witch.

"But they might force Cinder to," Lorene said. "Whoever gave this one the dark magic can turn it on Cinder. It's seductive and volatile. If Cinder is forced to make the full moon happen tonight, she'll die. It's against the laws of nature to change the moon's pull. If this one had done it, she would have died, too, although she may not have known that part. The earth will rebel against the power and destroy the one doing it. We don't have much time to get her out of harm's way."

Adam nodded.

Lorene added, "I'm going to send this one to the council for punishment. She's committed grievous sins against Wiccan-kind. You'll have your vengeance."

He turned on his heels and strode out of the barn, leaving the Wiccans to deal with the witch. He wanted to slaughter her himself, but he knew time was running out for his mate and that was far more important. His wolf howled at him to hurry, and he listened. After

checking on Angie to make sure she was okay, he left her in the care of the females and several guards and gathered the best fighters in the pack. He stood on the hood of his SUV and looked down at them. "We're going to get our *lygisa* back. Who's with me?"

The pack howled in agreement, and he was bolstered by their support.

"There's dark magic and a dangerous pack waiting for us. Stay alert and stay together."

Lorene climbed into the SUV as Adam jumped down and opened the driver's door. "I'll give you directions. I can see the location in my mind."

"Can you still feel Cinder?"

"Faintly. It was stronger when we were joined, but I can feel she's okay for now."

He didn't particularly care for the way she tacked on "for now" to the end of her sentence. He shoved the SUV into gear and pressed his foot on the gas as Lorene directed him away from the house and toward his mate.

I'm coming, sweetheart.

* * * * *

Cinder winced and cursed silently as her fingertips burned on the chain link when she tried to melt the links. It was slow work, but she had managed to melt a small section near the lock that was almost big enough to get her hand through. Focusing once more, she brushed the sweat out of her eyes and ignored the aches in her back and sent her power into the metal. The Wiccan part of her had been strong for a brief moment, and in her mind, she saw a woman covered in blood, hanging from a hook in a barn. She had felt the corners even though she couldn't see anything but the woman, and she reached out to them with as much strength as she could muster. She'd lost the connection after a few minutes, but being in touch with the corners had bolstered her spirits. If they were looking for her, then Adam knew she'd been taken and she hoped the corners had been able to pinpoint her location.

A large drop of molten metal splashed on the tile floor, and she retracted her power and rolled her neck. After giving the metal a chance to cool, she pushed her hand through the rough opening, just big enough for her to fit through without touching any of the sharp

edges. Curling her wrist, she touched the lock and closed her eyes. One of the first spells she'd learned as a youngster was an unlocking one because some older girls, who thought she was weird, had shut her in a storage closet at school. She'd spent a tearful hour in the dark before the janitor had heard her crying. Her mom immediately taught her the unlocking spell and helped her practice until she could unlock most every lock. The next time the girls had locked her in the closet, she unlocked it immediately and punched the oldest girl in the nose. They had never tried to lock her up again.

Blinking at the sudden tears as she thought of her mom, she began to chant and heard the tumblers turn slowly in the padlock. Just as she heard the padlock click open, the door to the room swung open and several wolves lumbered in. She hadn't seen them before, but something about the strange way they walked, as if someone was pushing down on their shoulders to hunch them over, made her jerk her arm back in the cage. She scraped her skin on the exposed metal, and blood welled in the cuts.

The males snarled and raced to her, pressing themselves against the cage. Their eyes were glossy and almost entirely black, and saliva frothed on their lips. She gasped and pushed herself into the far corner as they wrapped their fingers around the links and shook the cage.

Suddenly, they were thrown away, tossed like trash to land hard against the far walls. The male she shared DNA with – she would never call him *father* again – stood in front of the cage, chest heaving and eyes angry.

"She is the alpha's first," he roared, and the males rolled to their knees and hung their heads.

He turned his attention to her, and she saw the same glossy, black eyes in his face as she'd seen in the others.

"Let me go, please. I'm mated. My mate misses me and I miss him, please."

He blinked slowly, and the black seeped away until she was looking at eyes the same color green as her own. "I did not approve your mating, daughter of mine. My master has need of a mate, and a *lygisa* is the most powerful mate a wolf can have."

She clutched her bleeding arm to her chest and stared at him through the chain link. She thought she'd play dumb and see if that bought her some time. "What's a *lygisa*?"

He snorted derisively. "Don't be stupid. My master has been looking

for a *lygisa* for centuries. He has employed those who dabble in dark magic to find one before she came to power. Imagine my surprise when the fruit of my own loins is one." He squatted and eyed her speculatively. "If I'd known when your mother insisted I come see you on your birthday that you would be the perfect female for my master's purposes, I wouldn't have turned you away."

"Why do you call him *master*? Isn't he your alpha?"

The black seeped back into his eyes, like clouds obscuring the moon. "He is everything. You will submit to his will or he will ensure that you do. The marks on your neck are meaningless and will be removed. Rest now, daughter of mine. Your destiny is coming soon."

He straightened and reached for the lock, squeezing it with his hand. She heard the metal screech in protest. When he opened his hand, the lock, a mangled mess, now held the cage locked tight. He turned his attention to the cowering wolves in the corner. He pointed to the door and they fled, and then he walked away, shutting the door and leaving her alone once more.

She knew she could continue to burn the metal, but it would only sap her strength, and she was making such little progress that it wouldn't matter. If time were running out, then she had only one hope: that Adam would find her before the master of the pack came for her and forced her to do his bidding.

Hurry, Adam.

* * * * *

She wasn't sure how much time had passed since she'd been taken, or since she'd been left alone in the room a second time to ponder her fate. She was exhausted and scared, but she hadn't given up hope that Adam would find her. Even if this pack had done something to mute her powers and her wolf, they couldn't stop her and Adam from being mates. He was a fierce alpha, and he wouldn't rest until he found her; she knew that much. She didn't think she'd ever met a more determined male.

The door opened, and three females followed a large male into the room. The door shut, and the male grabbed the broken lock and twisted it, tossing the pieces to the floor with a clatter. He pulled open the cage and reached for her. She shrieked and tried to keep herself in the corner, but he was far stronger, grabbing her by one ankle and jerking her out. She grabbed onto the chain link, but he

pulled harder, and she was forced to let go, her fingers uncurling from the links as he dragged her to the center of the room.

"You know what to do. Don't disappoint the master or you'll feel my claws," he said. His voice was dark and unfriendly, with an air of authority that told her he was probably highly ranked within the pack. The way the males tossed around the word *master* concerned her. She'd never heard an alpha referred to as a master before.

Cinder stared at the three women. They appeared young, maybe only slightly older than Angie, and they scented of wolf. Long-life made it difficult to judge the age of a supernatural creature, but there was something youthful about their faces, even though their eyes told her that they'd seen more than their fair share of pain and heartache.

She licked at her dry lips and decided to try to engage them. If she could make friends with them, they might be able to help her. "My name is Cinder. My mate is Adam Beaumont. He's alpha and that makes me his alpha female."

One of the females, a thin blonde, shook her head as she sank to her knees next to Cinder with a bundle of cloth. "You're not a true alpha female. You're *lygisa*."

"I know what I am." Cinder shoved one of the other female's hands away as she tried to untie Cinder's shoe. "What are your names?"

They looked at one another for a moment, and then the blonde said, "My name is Delilah." She pointed to a redhead with bright green eyes. "She's Maddie and she's Stella," she finished by pointing to the brunette.

Cinder opened her mouth to try to get them to tell her more about themselves, but she found three pairs of hands tugging on her clothes and untying her shoes. She pushed their hands away again.

Maddie took Cinder's hand and squeezed lightly. "If you fight us, Klaus will come back and do this himself. You don't want his hands on you, *lygisa*. And he'll beat us for failing too."

She swallowed hard and blinked away the tears that tried to surface. "What are you going to do to me?"

Delilah said, "You have to remove the clothes of your old life. You'll be cleansed, and then you'll don the ceremonial cape. When we're done, Klaus will come back for you and you'll force the moon."

"Force the moon to do what?"

Maddie smiled sadly. "To rise. But not before the alpha makes you his mate. If you survive the rising of the full moon, you'll be given as

meat to the pack."

Fear poured over her. "They're going to *eat* me?"

Stella turned tear-filled eyes to Cinder. "*Meat* means the pack's plaything. The alpha will allow his highly ranked males to use you however they please and he'll watch. If you resist, you'll be bound. Sometimes meat survives, but not long. The males are rough." She rubbed absently at claw marks on her arm.

Maddie shook her head. "She's *lygisa*. They're very hard to kill."

Cinder was scared out of her wits, but she didn't want the females to be hurt for her. She could still find a way out of the situation. Her Wiccan powers might be able to help her in some way. She silently prayed that her rightful powers would be returned to her so she could put the alpha down and destroy the pack before he could harm her or anyone else.

Untying her shoes, she kicked them off and said, "When I get free, I'll take you with me, I swear."

"It's a nice thought," Delilah said, "but there is no hope here."

* * * * *

It was the slowest one hundred miles that he'd ever experienced, even though the caravan drove at top speed. He could think of nothing but getting to Cinder. He didn't fully understand what had happened to her, but he couldn't feel her through their connection as mates, and that terrified him on a cellular level. Lorene was a calming presence next to him as she sat with her eyes closed and a look of pure concentration on her face. She would occasionally speak to give him directions, but otherwise, she remained mute. Her lips moved, and he wondered if she was praying.

Wolves had ancestors they prayed to, along with the gods and goddesses of their kind, but he'd never been the sort of male who did that. His parents hadn't been particularly spiritual, but his grandmother had been. He remembered her praying for the safety of her family when hunting and for peace and prosperity for the pack. He wished she was still alive so he could ask her to pray for Cinder.

Lorene's hand touched his arm. "You're thinking about someone?"

"My grandma. She died in a hunting accident when I was a teenager."

"I'm sorry for you loss, Adam."

“Were you praying or something? I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“I was praying for Cinder’s safety.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel, but he forced himself to relax so he didn’t bend and ruin it. “Why can’t I feel her? We’re mated.”

“Someone is using dark magic. I believe that whoever took Cinder knows that she’s *lygisa,* and they also know that you are a fierce alpha who will not rest until you find her. He probably knows he can’t wait until the real full moon, so he’s using dark magic to force the full moon a day early.”

“Could the witch you bound have done it?”

“She was powerful, but she wasn’t a natural Wiccan. She had some natural talent within her, so she probably had an ancestor who was Wiccan before turning away from it, but someone gave her power. To force nature requires a tremendous amount of power, more than any supernatural creature could have on his or her own.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I believe whoever took Cinder has contracted with a demon.”

“How the hell does someone do that and why would they even want to?”

She was silent for a moment and then she said, “Demons can be good or bad. My granddaughter, Elizabeth, contacted a demon about her future once, and he helped her. But these events – Cinder’s kidnapping, the forcing of the full moon, and her *lygisa* status – they are all intertwined. Whoever took Cinder must be working with a demon to have enough power to force the moon, because he would know that once she performs the *lygisa* ceremony, she will lose her connection to you forever. She would die without the pack, so you couldn’t just slaughter them and take her back. Once a *lygisa* is bound to her pack, she can never be with another.”

He snarled and pushed back the desire to punch the dashboard. He’d known it was dangerous for Cinder, but he’d believed her safe in the house. It hadn’t occurred to him when she said she could feel a wolf in pain that it was anything but her naturally connecting to the pack. The witch had used Angie to draw Cinder out of the house, and Adam had traipsed along like a jackass.

“Your sister would have been killed if you hadn’t found her. I know that you’re worried about Cinder and blaming yourself, but I believe that whoever was pulling the evil one’s strings would have gotten to

Cinder in another way."

They passed a weathered sign that read, "Now Entering Swallow Hills," and his wolf howled at being so close.

The sky suddenly turned dark, as if someone had pulled a curtain over the town and Lorene gasped. "Hurry, Adam. Turn left at the next street. We don't have much time!"

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Chapter 14

The flames of a large bonfire flickered brightly. Cinder stood between two large males, her wrists chained in front of her. She was naked, and the scratchy wool cloak did little to hide her body. Wolves surrounded them in a large circle, leaving the center clear where the fire blazed. It reminded her of the sacred circle where Adam's pack would celebrate their full moon ceremonies.

Her eyes stung as she thought about her mate. She reached out mentally to him, to the place inside her where their connection had been, but found nothing. Ever since the three females had helped her get ready for this abomination of a ceremony, she hadn't felt *anything* at all. Not Adam, her pack, the *lygisa* powers, or even her Wiccan powers that had risen to help her before. She was completely helpless – a feeling she loathed.

Roscoe stood next to his alpha. Their eyes were completely black, as were every pack member's. She could feel evil crackling in the air. The alpha was bare from the waist up, wearing only faded jeans and a smirk that made her want to retch.

The alpha raised his hand and everyone quieted. He began to chant, and the pack dropped to their knees and joined him, their voices blending. She didn't recognize the words of the chant or understand their meaning, but the sky darkened and goosebumps rose on her skin as fear raced down her spine.

The flames of the fire crackled and spit as it grew larger, turning from orange and yellow to deep scarlet and black. A face appeared in the flames, with sunken eyes and big fangs. She screamed and jerked backward, but the males holding her kept her in place. The face moved in the flames, its mouth opening wide as if it was speaking, but she couldn't hear anything but the sound of crackling flames.

"I know you hear me, little *lygisa*," the creature spoke, his voice hissing in her ear like a snake.

She cringed and shook her head. "Stop it!"

The visage chuckled darkly, the great fanged maw of its visage opening and closing in the flames. “Your spirit will be quickly broken by the alpha, and then you’ll do my bidding.”

“I don’t belong to you,” she shouted.

Two young males carrying wooden buckets tipped them and dumped salt from their contents, creating a salt circle. The line circled the cleared space around the fire. Roscoe was just outside the line, and the alpha stood just inside it. As the young males drew close to her, the males who held her shoved her forward. She stumbled to the ground as the salt circle closed and heat enveloped her.

The circle shimmered and snapped shut as a red haze distorted her view of the pack. She went to her knees and the alpha, suddenly by her side, fisted her hair and jerked her off balance. She rolled to her stomach, the dirt and stones scraping her already burned hands.

The pack chanted louder, and the demon in the flames grew larger. Horns appeared on the top of its head, and the black, sunken orbs of its eyes glittered dangerously.

“Take her now. The time for the moon’s ascent draws near.”

The alpha ripped the cloak from her back and poured oil on her. She shrieked in surprise and scrambled away, but he grabbed her ankle and jerked her back to him. She rolled to her back, and he punched her in the mouth. Her head snapped back and her vision dimmed for a moment. He jerked her up to her knees by her neck, his mouth taking hers in a brutal kiss. She realized in that moment what he was trying to do – he was anointing her with the sacred oil of the *lygisa* ceremony and taking her blood. He lifted from her mouth and licked his lips, stained red with her blood. His fangs elongated, and he lifted his wrist to his mouth and bit down.

If she drank his blood and he raped her, she’d be his. Even though the *lygisa* ceremony hadn’t been performed in full yet, she could feel the power slowly seeping into her body. The demon cackled gleefully as the alpha turned his wrist over and pushed it to her face. With every ounce of power she could manage, she raised her bare foot and kicked him in the groin, clamping her lips closed tightly so she didn’t ingest any of the blood that spilled freely from his wounded wrist.

He howled as he fell to the ground, clutching his groin. The demon roared and the fire blazed. She rolled to her knees and felt her powers slowly returning.

“I am not your pawn, and I will *not* force the full moon tonight,” she yelled, reaching into the earth with her powers. The ground trembled,

and the wolves' chanting stuttered. Roscoe called for the alpha and tried to come into the salt circle, but he couldn't breach the barrier.

As she reached into the ground with her powers, asking the earth to help set her free and stop the evil, she felt Adam and his pack drawing close.

Her mate. Her pack.

"I will you away from this realm, demon!" She felt her fangs elongate, and she slashed her wrist, flinging her blood toward the fire.

The droplets sizzled, causing the demon to shriek as his image dimmed for a brief moment. The demon snarled and the flames grew brighter. Cinder shielded her eyes and pressed her free hand to the ground. The earth trembled violently.

Around the salt circle, the pack began to move in fear, pushing away from the circle and into the darkness. She felt Adam and the pack come, ready to fight. She felt the presence of pure goodness and power, and she saw Lorene step to the edge of the salt circle and lift her hands.

"I call upon the mirador sentinels of the North, keepers of the powers of our mother, the Earth. I call upon you this night to grant my prayers. Hear me! Banish the demon and set the earth free of this threat. Hear me!"

Cinder felt the earth tremble even more violently. A crack appeared in the ground near the bonfire, and the demon hissed like a snake as the flames turned green and blue. Cinder scrambled for the salt line, breaking it with her hands as she swiped the salt and broke the circle. Lorene grabbed her and pulled her away as the ground continued to split causing the earth inside the circle to cave in upon itself. The alpha screamed as he disappeared into the dark hole, with the demon and its flame following. Thick vines shot up from inside the hole and grabbed members of the alpha's pack, pulling them into the darkness as they begged for mercy. She saw Roscoe just a heartbeat before he disappeared into the ground. The hole suddenly filled in with dirt, and the panicked screams of the pack members were cut off.

Cinder fell to the ground on weak knees, and Adam's comforting arms surrounded her. She wrapped her arms around him and cried.

"I've got you," he whispered, holding her tightly.

"Don't let me go."

"I won't, love, I swear on my life."

She squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to think of how close she

came to almost losing Adam completely – and possibly her own life.

"Take me home."

* * * * *

Adam looked around as he held his trembling mate. The carnage of battle left the woods scenting of blood and death. His pack had arrived just in time to watch Cinder turn the tables on her captors. He didn't know if she would have been successful without Lorene's help, but Cinder was most definitely powerful. He buried his face in her neck and inhaled her sweet scent. The connection bloomed between them, and he growled in relief.

Looking up, he found Lorene smiling at him. She held out her sweater, and he took it, covering Cinder's naked body. His anger boiled up as he wondered what she'd been through in the hours since she'd been taken, but all he had to do was look around and see that hardly any of the evil pack members were alive. A handful of females and two older males knelt nearby, with the females crying and the males appearing submissive.

"What did you do?" he asked Lorene as he stood, tucking Cinder close. Her grip on him was like iron. He didn't think she'd let go anytime soon, and that was just fine with him.

Lorene looked over the empty space where a raging bonfire and a pack of wolves had tried to move time forward. "I called for the earth to protect itself and it answered."

"They're dead?"

She nodded. "The ones left behind had no willing part in the alpha's plans. Everyone who disappeared into the earth was culpable. They were tried and executed by the world they tried to harm."

"I didn't know the earth could do that."

Lorene looked at Cinder in his arms. "She started it. I felt her deny the demon and call to the earth to protect itself. I just added my power to hers."

Brick walked toward Adam, and Lorene excused herself, walking to the center of the place where the gaping hole had been. She knelt and pressed her hands to the earth. He turned his back to give her privacy and looked at his best friend.

Brick asked, "What do you want us to do with those seven?"

"For now, they'll come home with us. They weren't part of what was going on here, or they would have disappeared into the hole. If they want to stay together, see if you can find people with a few empty rooms in their homes. I want Cinder to be able to talk to them if she wants to, but I don't want them in our home."

"I'll handle it." Brick looked at the ground and then at Adam. "Is our alpha female okay?"

"For now. But have Doc Whalen meet us at the house. Let's get the fuck out of here."

Adam carried his mate to his SUV and set her on the passenger seat. He glanced up as he shut the door to see Solan helping Lorene into the back of his SUV. Climbing behind the wheel, he turned on the engine and reached for Cinder, drawing her close.

She hadn't said anything after their short conversation. He didn't know if she was just exhausted or if she was in shock.

"Sweetheart, are you okay? Do you need me to take you to the hospital?"

"You said you were going to take me home."

He smiled and squeezed her shoulder lightly. "I will, but if you're hurt, I want you to get help."

"I don't need the hospital."

"Good, but just to be safe, Doc Whalen is going to meet us at the house."

Cinder nodded. Then she said, "Adam, I have a confession to make."

"Oh?"

"I dreamed about that alpha and the pack."

"When?"

"A few days ago. It was a nightmare. I dreamed the alpha raped me and you were there and they killed you."

"Friday night?" Previous events were starting to make sense. "You had a nightmare where I died and you were taken and you went to the Wiccans Saturday morning because you were scared."

"I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"I wish you had come to me, sweetheart, but your *lygisa* power might not have swelled like that if you hadn't been with the Wiccans. And it clearly wasn't a vision because they didn't get their hands on me."

"And they didn't touch me either. Except they completely freaked me

out. I think that even the guy who shared my DNA would have – I don't even want to finish that thought."

She shivered and he kissed the top of her head. He was thankful that she hadn't been touched.

"We can put the night behind us. You're mine and I'm yours, and no one will take you from me again."

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

He couldn't let another minute pass without telling her one more thing. "Cinder, when you disappeared on me in the woods, I thought I'd lost you forever. Our connection was gone, and I couldn't figure out where you were. I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

She snuggled closer.

"I kept thinking that I hadn't told you how I feel, because I wanted to wait until you told me first. I kept pushing you into things with me, and I didn't want you to think I was just bulldozing over your feelings or trying to rush things again."

"Adam?" Her voice was tinged with amusement.

He glanced down at her before turning his eyes back to the road. "Yeah, sweetheart?"

"I love you."

His heart squeezed. "You do?"

"I knew I did because when that pack took me, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Whatever they did to me dampened the *lygisa,* which dampened my wolf. I felt lost, and I missed you. I missed our connection."

"It's back now," he said.

"I know. I think when my Wiccan surfaced to help me, that whatever they did – dark magic I'm certain – it only pushed away the *lygisa* so I couldn't shift and defend myself or draw on the *lygisa* powers. I can't feel my Wiccan anymore, though. Just the *lygisa* and the wolf. She missed her mate."

"I missed you, too, sweetheart." He pulled her closer, and her hand grasped the front of his shirt and fisted it tightly. "I love you, Cinder."

She rubbed her cheek on his shoulder. "I know you do, Adam. I can feel it in my bones."

She made a soft sound, halfway between a growl and a purr, and he growled lightly in response.

“My sweet mate, what would I do without you?” he whispered.

She sighed, and he felt her relax against him. “I hope we never have to find out.”

* * * * *

Cinder felt weary to the very center of her being and her body ached, especially her burned hands. She’d been able to ignore the pain when she’d been running on pure adrenaline, but now that she was safe and going home, the pain had returned. She couldn’t see much in the dim light from the dashboard, but she could feel the blisters on her hands from where the Wiccan powers had burned because she hadn’t been able to control them as she had always done before.

She pulled Lorene’s oversized sweater from around her shoulders and slipped it over her head. The soft knit was long enough to reach her thighs and cover her and the fabric smelled of lavender.

She hoped that when she shifted on the full moon, her wounds would be healed. If she were still her fully Wiccan self, she could have created a poultice to help her hands heal, but she wasn’t a Wiccan anymore. The *lygisa* book had some healing spells, though, so she’d look for one when they got to the house.

She closed her eyes as she rested against Adam’s strong shoulder. Inwardly, she could feel the wolf even more than she’d been able to feel her prior to being taken. Perhaps having the *lygisa* and wolf taken away from her had made her more sensitive to the beast. She was anxious to see the pack and to thank the males who had come to help her.

She hadn’t realized she’d fallen asleep until Adam was gently waking her.

“We’re home, sweetheart,” he said with a low murmur. His warm hand slipped over her cheek, and his fingers tickled her neck.

She blinked open her eyes and smiled. “It’s good to be home.”

He pressed his lips to hers and then pushed open his door. The headlights illuminated Adam as he strode around the front of the truck, and she realized there were people standing in the front yard. Adam opened the passenger door and helped her out. Her knees were weak, and she felt as though she’d boxed ten rounds with a grizzly, but she’d never been happier than at this moment.

Her wolf rejoiced to see the pack, and the connection that Cinder had

felt to them through Adam bloomed. She stepped away from Adam and walked slowly toward the pack. They stood quietly in front of the house. The headlights turned off automatically, but lights from the house still illuminated the people. They parted as she walked into their midst, closing ranks around her until she was surrounded. Stretching out her hands, she reached for them, brushing her fingers against their bodies. As she touched the pack, she felt them reach for her wolf, comforting and strengthening her from the inside out. The connection between her and the pack morphed, until it wasn't a connection through Adam, but one of her own. The wolves closest to her had grasped her arms firmly but gently, and the wolves around them held on to one another, until she felt that she was being touched by every pack member. Their wolves touched her, rubbed against her in her mind, and filled her with a sense of belonging she'd never experienced before.

Her hands began to tingle as warmth filled her and a sense of family settled over her. She might be Adam's mate, but these were her people now too. She wasn't a stranger standing on the outside, she was one of them. In that moment, she knew that they would die for her, and she would die for them.

A *lygisa* blessing came to mind, and she felt the warm power flare inside her as she spoke the ancient words, asking the spirits of the *lygisa* before her to bless and protect the people who had come to mean so much to her. She felt the pack's thankfulness for the blessing, felt as though she'd touched each of them in some way. One by one they moved away, but two males stayed – Doc and Leo.

Leo looked over her head and then met her gaze. "I'm sorry for the part I played in the beginning of things. I never meant to hurt you."

"I know you didn't Leo. I was never mad at you, anyway." She smiled and he grinned.

"I'm glad you're the alpha, Cin. I always knew you were special."

Doc elbowed him. "That's quite enough, lover boy."

Leo gave her a little wave and walked away. Flexing her fingers, she looked down at her hands and saw that the flesh had healed completely.

"I'm healed," she said, noticing that all her aches and pains had disappeared.

Lorene smiled. "The *lygisa* powers work both ways. You can heal the pack with them, and the pack can fortify your natural healing powers through your connection. It's why a *lygisa* can't survive the loss of the

pack. You're entwined with them."

"Thank you for coming with Adam to help me. I don't know what would have happened without your power and support."

"The coven will always be here for you, Cinder. Even though you're not technically Wiccan any longer, I consider you a friend and I *always* fight for my friends."

Cinder hugged Lorene. Adam thanked her and then they watched as Lorene got into her car and left. A part of her was sad to see Lorene go, because she felt as though she wouldn't see her much in the future, but regardless of whether she was part of the coven or not, she knew that she'd never forget how Lorene had helped to save her life.

"I guess you don't need a doctor," Doc Whalen said, smiling broadly.

"Thank you for coming."

"You're my alpha, Cinder. I would move heaven and earth to help you if I could." He nodded his head at Adam and walked away.

Adam slipped his arms around her. "How do you feel?"

"Glad to be home."

He pressed his mouth to hers briefly. "All I want to do right now is get you in the shower."

She wrinkled her nose. "Do I smell that bad?"

"You smell like another pack, and my wolf is snapping at me to cover you with *my* scent."

Wiggling her brows, she said, "Sounds fun."

He pulled her against him with a soft growl. "It will be."

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Chapter 15

Adam leaned against the kitchen counter and took a drink of coffee, watching Cinder talk to the wolves sitting around the table. The large oak table – carved by a pack member – held twelve comfortably. On full moon mornings, the alphas' house was a hive of activity. Every pack member was required to check in and find out what their full moon duties were.

There was a lot to be done today. It wasn't just a standard full moon. Cinder was joining the pack as his mate, the alpha female, and also fully gaining her *lygisa* powers. It was also her first time shifting. He had no idea what it would be like for her. Sixteen years was a typical shifting age for most. Cinder was nineteen plus one and had only recently begun to experience the more wolfy side of her heritage.

She stood and joined him, leaning against him with a soft sigh.

He could feel tension in her body. Motioning with his head, he wordlessly told the wolves to leave them alone, and they complied immediately. Wrapping his arms around her, he inhaled her sweet scent and kissed the top of her head.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

"I feel kind of weird."

"Weird how?"

She rubbed her cheek on his chest and hugged herself closer. "My joints hurt a little, and I feel antsy."

"All wolves feel a bit different on the full moon. It's your first one, and your wolf is finally getting a chance to stretch her legs."

"What was your first full moon like?"

He chuckled. "I spent the morning working for the alpha, and then I went carousing until the pack gathered. I shifted and was inducted into the pack, and then I went hunting with my dad and grandfather."

"Carousing? You mean you went to find a willing female?" She lifted

her head with a smirk.

He gazed down at her. Her eyes were a pretty mix of green and the gold of her wolf. "Where were you when I was growing up?"

Her hands flexed on his back, and a soft growl seeped from her throat. "Good way to change the subject, Alpha."

He grinned.

"So if I was a normal wolf and this was my first full moon, what would I be doing?"

"You're not a normal wolf. You're alpha and *lygisa*," he pointed out.

She stared at him. "Oh, just tell me."

Adam said, "If you were a male, you'd be working to clean up where we meet to celebrate, or doing whatever your superiors said. As a female, you'd be either with the female members of your family or with the unmated females. During the first few full moons, new wolves aren't asked to do anything but to be safe. Their families watch out for them. But once they're comfortable and willing, then they check in with their superiors and do what's asked of them."

"I'll be a superior, right?"

"The most superior."

"Superior-ist?"

He chuckled. "Whatever you want to call it. You're the highest-ranked female. When you're ready to assume the responsibility, the females will meet with you, and you'll hand out the jobs. Cleaning and cooking in our house and helping pack members who need it."

"I want to be a new wolf this full moon."

"What do you mean? You *are* a new wolf."

"No, I mean I want to help out. I want to know what needs to be done so that I have a better understanding of the pack. Let's go work today."

He wasn't surprised that Cinder wanted to be with the pack today. She felt connected to a group like she never had before, and she wanted to explore what that meant.

"All right, my mate. There's work to be done. It's an important full moon, you know."

She picked up the *lygisa* book from the counter and took his hand. He pushed open the back door, and they stepped out onto the deck. A young male was mowing the lawn; the scent of cut grass permeated

the air. He could see a few males and females inside the barn, cleaning. Stepping down onto the grass, they walked through the yard and into the woods.

She stopped a few feet into the woods and looked back at the house. "I can feel them."

"The pack?"

"Mm-hmm. They're busy and happy." She smiled and touched her free hand to her chest. "I feel happier knowing they're happy."

"They're happy you're here, sweetheart, but not as much as me."

"Aw." She smiled further, her cheeks darkening in a blush.

As they walked to the clearing where the pack would gather to celebrate the full moon, she told him about speaking with her mom earlier that morning.

"She said she thought that the alpha had drawn the whole pack into dark magic. The demon probably was very seductive, making a lot of promises in exchange for their loyalty."

"Was she upset?"

"Of course, but upset that I'd been taken and nearly killed. She said she wished she'd never brought him back when I was eighteen because then he wouldn't have known where I was. I told her that it wouldn't have mattered because they were using dark magic and would have found me regardless."

His wolf gnashed his teeth. "I wish I could have protected you."

"The bad guys are dead, and we're all safe. I think we won that battle."

They walked into the clearing. Wolves removed debris from the wide area where the pack would gather. Cinder raised her head and looked at the sky. The trees had been chopped down years ago to create an opening in the thick canopy so that the moon could be seen shining brightly in the clearing.

"There's a monthly rotation so that every wolf helps prepare the clearing."

"What are we going to do?"

He took the book from her and gently turned the old pages until he found the preparation instructions for the *lygisa* ceremony.

"We're going to get the wood ready. Or, rather, I'm going to chop it, and you're going to haul it. Sound like fun?"

“Not remotely.”

He chuckled. “While we’re working, I’ll tell you about being a wolf.”

He handed the book to her, and she followed him to where several trees had been felled and sectioned, ready to be chopped. He picked up a section of oak and set it on a large stump. Lifting the axe, he swung it a few times in practice, and then he brought it down smoothly into the center of the log and split it.

“Cool.”

He grinned. “I had a lot of practice as a teenager. Read the instructions, love.”

She settled on the grass and opened the book, laying it in her lap. “A fire is laid from the wood of oak trees. Why oak?”

He set another piece on the chopping block and split it. “It’s strong and lives a long time. It’s a symbol of the strength and longevity of the pack and their bond to the *lygisa*.”

She hummed in her throat and looked down at the book while he swung the axe again. “Tell me about your first shift.”

“I shifted for the first time the month I turned sixteen, just a few days before my birthday. It’s good luck for wolves to shift in their birth month.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because it makes us more awesome?”

She laughed and threw a stick at him.

He was fortunate to grow up in a pack that cared about the young wolves as much as his did. After his fifteenth birthday, he was allowed to begin working on the full moons. He was a glorified errand boy, but he hadn’t cared. He’d been so hungry to shift and join the ranks of the pack members.

“I was a total pain in the ass the week before the full moon. My parents were sure I would shift, so my dad and grandpa waited with me that night in the clearing. They talked me through the shift and then took me on my first hunt.”

“New wolves shift in front of the pack?”

He tugged off his shirt, wiping the sweat from his brow with it, and then tucked it into his waistband. “Being naked and shifting is normal for us. The pack shifts together and goes to hunt in our territory. And I’ll point out that Wiccans like to get naked together for their ceremonies too.”

She rolled her eyes so hard he was surprised they didn't pop right out of her head.

"We wear cloaks and we're all women, and the guards who are there always turn their backs to us. It's entirely different."

"Po-tay-to, po-tah-to."

"You really want everyone in the pack to see me naked?" She stood, hugging the book to her chest.

"They won't be paying attention, love. They're going to be waiting for us to share our pleasure with them."

"It sounds totally kinky and strange since your parents are going to be there."

He laughed and closed the distance to her. Sliding an arm around her waist, he pulled her close until their bodies were touching. He bent and kissed her ear, enjoying how she shivered. "After your *lygisa* ceremony and after you join the pack as alpha female, I'm going to pull you down to the ground and fuck you. When we come together — and we will, sweetheart – we're going to focus on that hot, twisting, amazing feeling deep inside of us and push it out to the pack." He leaned away from her to look into her eyes. "You think the pack is happy now because you're here with me – with them – but wait until they feel our love for each other like a physical being. Sharing our pleasure is a way to tie the pack together."

"Then I'll shift?"

He nodded. "Angie has some clothes for you to wear so you don't have to be naked during the ceremonies or when we share pleasure. Maybe someday, though, you won't mind it. I'd love to see your beautiful body highlighted by firelight."

She rested her cheek against his shoulder. "Thank you for sharing your life with me, Adam."

"There's more to tell, love, but first, we've got wood to haul, and then you've got some *lygisa* stuff to get ready, right?"

"I do."

Tucking the book under her arm, she picked up a piece of wood, and Adam scooped up several logs. They returned to the clearing together. It took six trips to fill the fire pit. He could have sent others to grab the wood, gotten a wheelbarrow, or even carried a lot more than he did each trip, but he enjoyed walking with Cinder and talking to her. She wanted to know everything about the pack, and he shared everything he knew. By the time they were finished hauling wood,

he'd filled her in on pack history and about his rise to the rank of alpha, and she'd shared with him stories of her childhood, her mom, and her desire to join with a more friendly coven.

"Being half-Wiccan was hard," she said, holding his hand as they walked through the woods to the house. "I had the power, but I wasn't *whole*, and some covens are exclusive. Once the corners found out that I was part wolf, even though at the time that part of me was dormant, they strongly suggested I find a different coven."

"There are packs like that, but ours isn't. The previous alpha had a Wiccan mate, and several of the younger wolves have mates who aren't wolves. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter what a person *is*, only what they do with what they *are*."

"You're pretty sexy when you're being noble."

Stopping at the bottom of the steps, he tugged her close and growled softly when her curves fit against him perfectly. "Wanna take you upstairs," he said as he slid his hands through her hair and fisted the soft strands lightly.

Nuzzling her neck, he let her scent wrap around him and the wolf, who he'd kept at bay all morning to honor Cinder's request to be treated like a new wolf, was suddenly there. Without another word, he lifted her into his arms and stalked into the house. He couldn't get to the room fast enough, and when he did, the slammed door and thrown lock were loud reminders to everyone that he and Cinder didn't want to be disturbed.

For a while.

* * * * *

Cinder could have stayed in Adam's arms all day and been thoroughly content. Being with him kept most of the aches at bay, and the little that slipped through was manageable. When she wasn't touching him, she felt as though her bones were trying to pop apart. Her wolf paced in her mind, anxious for the full moon, but the powerful part of her – the *lygisa* – was growing too. She could feel the power bubbling inside her, growing stronger in preparation to come to her completely. As a natural Wiccan, she'd always had powers, so she'd never gone through a real awakening like this. It was as if she was seeing the world for the first time. Unlike her Wiccan power, the powers of the *lygisa* were wolf-centric. She could feel the pull of the moon on the pack members, and could even sense where the pack was

at any given moment. At first, she'd been most aware of Adam and his family, but as the day had waned, she'd come to realize she could sense each pack member.

A grinding noise brought her back to the present, and she smiled at Angie, who was helping prepare the ingredients for the *lygisa* spell. Cinder looked down at her own mortar and pestle and gave one more twist for good measure and gently set the pestle on Adam's office desk. They'd begun work in the kitchen, but the females had been so interested in what she and Angie were doing, they had been too distracting, so she and Angie had taken over Adam's office. Not that he minded. He was busy in a meeting with the highest-ranked wolves in the front room. On the next full moon, she'd be in the meeting, too, but for this first one, she had more important tasks to complete.

"How are you coming with that landor seed?"

Angie tilted the soapstone bowl slightly, and Cinder could see she'd done a great job reducing the tiny pink seeds to dust.

"I've never heard of landor."

"It's not from our realm. Some of our supplies are from other realms."

Cinder added the grinded landor seeds to the spell chest, a small wooden trunk that Adam had bought for her. She looked inside at the different spices, herbs, and minerals that would help her fully accept her power.

"Are you nervous?" Angie asked as Cinder closed the chest and carried it out of the office.

"A little. I'm not afraid of the power, but I'm kind of freaked out about shifting."

"You saw yourself in the vision, though, right?"

"Yeah, but seeing and actually doing are two different things."

Angie chuckled. "I guess so. Come to my room. I have something for you."

Cinder followed Angie down the hall to her bedroom. The second floor contained the bedrooms of the family members and the highest-ranked males who lived there. It was a busy house with so many adults living in it, but it was one of the most comforting places she'd ever lived. She was completely surrounded by the pack. With the coven, she'd lived in her own home and only been around them when she was working or during ceremonies. The pack lived together, and those who didn't live in the alphas' house lived nearby in the territory.

Angie opened her bedroom door, and Cinder stepped inside. She

turned in a slow circle to take in the room's decor. The white walls were painted with cherry blossoms. The branches were dark, the blossoms varying shades of white and pink. She moved for a closer look.

"They almost look real," Cinder said as she stared at one of the flowers, with her fingertips hovering just over it.

"Thanks. It took a freaking long time."

"You did this?" Cinder looked at Angie in surprise.

She shrugged, looking shy. "I like to paint. When Adam took over as alpha, he said I could do whatever I wanted with the bedroom. I love cherry blossoms. They symbolize beauty and joy."

"How long did it take you?" She cast her gaze around the room. The furniture was white – the full bed, desk, dresser, and nightstand – but each one had cherry blossoms painted on the surface somewhere.

"A year. I slept on the couch in Adam's office until I was done. I didn't want to move in until it was complete because I thought I'd get complacent and not finish. It was the longest year of my life – that couch is not comfortable."

"Wow, it's so beautiful. You did an amazing job."

Angie smiled broadly. She moved to the bed and pointed to a stack of fabric. "These are full moon clothes."

Cinder joined her as Angie laid them out – a short black skirt made of soft, stretchy material and a black tank top.

"What makes them full moon clothes?"

"First, they're inexpensive. One of the females in the pack makes them. If you ruin either piece, it won't cost a lot to replace and you can get them in any color. And second, they're loose enough that if you're dressed when you shift, you can wiggle out of them when you're done."

"Really? Cool."

"When we're young, the shift can come on us really suddenly. I lost a lot of cute pants before I took my mom's advice and wore the simpler clothes."

"Thanks, Angie."

"You're welcome. You're not just my alpha female. You're my sister. I always wanted one."

"Me too."

Angie hugged her, and Cinder gathered the clothes and said goodbye. Her nerves rose once more as she hugged the clothes to her chest and walked up to the third floor. She could feel the full moon drawing close and the excitement of the pack. They were receiving a lot tonight — a *lygisa* and an alpha female — but she was getting so much more. After this night, she'd be a fully shifting female with the power of the lygisa, she'd take her place as a pack member, and she'd be the alpha female. They were gaining a leader, but she would be gifted with a big family in return.

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Chapter 16

Adam watched his mate as she spoke to the females. The wolves from the evil pack were standing together, but three of the females, who Cinder said were helpful to her, were next to his mate. They looked at her with the adoration of people who had been in bondage and suddenly freed. He had thought that they might want to stay out of pack life and find their own way, but all of them wanted to stay if they were welcome, and Adam and Cinder agreed they could.

The sun was slowly setting, bathing the woods in soft oranges and ambers, making the shadows lengthen. She wore what he'd come to think of as the females' uniform – a short skirt and a loose tank top. She looked amazing in it, especially because he knew what she looked like under the clothes, or maybe because he was so totally nuts about her. She could probably wear a potato sack and he'd think her beautiful.

"You look like a guy from the cover of one of my mom's romance novels," Brick said as he came to stand next to Adam.

"What?"

"You know," Brick clutched his hands together over his heart and batted his eyes, "I just *lurve* her so much, and she's so bee-yoo-tee-ful."

Adam's face flashed with heat, and he turned and tackled his cousin with a snarl. Brick hit the ground with a loud thud, the wind whooshing from his lungs as Adam landed on top of him.

Adam growled, his face inches from his beta as he bared his fangs. "Don't compare me to a romance novel model again."

Brick's eyes widened and then he laughed. "You must be in love. Six months ago, you'd have thrown me halfway across the yard for saying something like that."

Adam snorted and stood, pulling Brick to his feet with a little more force then necessary. He tugged him close and clamped his hand on the back of his neck so he could whisper in his ear, "You're betting I

won't kill you because my mate is watching, but there's always tomorrow. Test me again and see how genial I am."

Brick dropped his head and tilted his neck. "Sorry, Alpha."

"I'll bet you are." Adam gave Brick's neck a little extra squeeze and released him.

Brick flashed Adam a grin before he ducked away into the crowd. In truth, Adam didn't mind his pack seeing the physical proof of his affection for Cinder. He knew they could feel it through their connection to him, but seeing it was good too.

Cinder met Adam's eyes, her brow cocked in curiosity. His mom said something under her breath that he couldn't hear, and all the females giggled, including his mate. He was pretty sure he didn't want to know what was said.

Cinder's eyes flashed golden, and she swayed slightly. Adam rushed to her side, keeping her upright.

"It's time," she said, her voice otherworldly.

Keeping one arm around her to hold her steady, he walked with Cinder through the woods to the clearing. The woods darkened as the sun set completely, but the wolves didn't need light to see, thanks to their enhanced eyesight. He left Cinder next to the unlit fire pit and stepped back, joining the pack as they entered the clearing and created a circle around the pit. Earlier in the day, he'd marked out a barrier in logs so that no wolves would be inside the perimeter where Cinder needed to perform the ceremony. He stood with Brick and Solan, his family, and the pack, and watched as Cinder turned and set a few items on the ground.

She straightened, lifting a leather sack from the ground, and walked six steps toward him. Stopping, she pulled at a small string in the corner of the bag. As it opened, something poured out. The substance looked like salt, but he knew it wasn't *just* salt, but a combination of other minerals meant to protect her as she took on the mantel of her *lygisa* power.

Her lips began to move as she walked a slow circle around the perimeter of the fire pit. He'd read the words in the book, but he couldn't hear anything but the sound of rushing wind. It was a form of protection, so that no one but a *lygisa* could actually hear the words being spoken. He felt the earth begin to tremble as she reached her starting point and the last grains of minerals formed a closed circle. A brilliant flash of red made him close his eyes for a brief moment, and when he opened them, he could see Cinder standing next to the fire

pit, with a red haze completely enclosing the circle.

She bent and picked up the chest, opening the top and fisting a handful of the crushed herbs and spices that she and Angie had spent the afternoon working with.

She spun, tossing the handful onto the logs in the fire pit. The wood blazed to life, the flames reaching higher than he'd ever seen before. The heart of the fire was white and blue, the outer flames crimson and orange. He felt the heat from several feet away and was thankful that Cinder was protected and wouldn't be harmed by the heat.

Her voice was clear and powerful as she spoke. "I, Cinder Knight, hereby claim the mantel of *lygisa*. I accept the power over wolf and pack, over earth and flame, and vow to never betray my pack or my mate."

She turned and shoved her hand into the box, extracting another handful of herbs, which she tossed onto the fire. The flames roared and stretched higher, causing the orange to disappear from the tips of the flames as the white and blue center expanded.

"I declare myself *lygisa*."

She threw another handful.

"I vow myself to the protection of my pack."

She threw another. The center expanded farther, the red nearly gone as the tips of the flames turned purple for a moment before turning bright blue entirely. Adam's eyes watered as he watched his mate, but he refused to look away and miss a second of what she was doing.

"I accept the responsibility of the power of *lygisa* and I claim that power now! *Forlonna gretia lormasktra!*"

The last of the chest's contents hit the wood, and she dropped the chest to the ground as the fire turned entirely white, save for a golden, glowing center that appeared. She lifted a bottle of sacred oil and poured it over her fingertips. She spread her fingers across her chest and over her heart, and then placed the bottle on the ground. The golden center crawled up the flames until it hovered over them. The form of a wolf's head took shape. The eyes were black, lit with stars, and the fangs glittered like diamonds in its huge mouth.

The golden, ghostly wolf lifted its head and howled and shimmering golden tendrils snaked down from the flames, touching each pack member. One descended on Adam, and he felt the connection of Cinder's *lygisa* power to the pack. The wolf was the image of the *lygisa* who had gone on before, the ones who now gave Cinder the power to protect her pack as only a *lygisa* could.

As one, the pack lifted their heads and howled, a sound of pure thankfulness for Cinder's place of reverence in their pack. The tendrils were pulled back to the wolf who seemed to smile at Cinder before drifting back into the flames and disappearing.

Cinder's hands lifted, and the red haze surrounding her disappeared as the salt circle lifted off the ground. The grains swirled overhead before funneling into the flames. Her hands lowered slowly, and the fire returned to normal.

She turned slowly, her eyes still golden, and smiled, showing her fangs.

"It's time, my alpha mate."

* * * * *

Cinder couldn't vocalize exactly how she felt in that moment, but she'd never been more in tune with anything than she was with the pack. She could feel each member through an individual connection like a strand of wire. The wires wove together as the pack – and she was part of that now – connected to them as much as they were to her. She felt their happiness as it twined with her own, a feeling of family and togetherness that rivaled everything but the shining connection to Adam. Together, as alpha mates, they were now joined even more tightly thanks to her *lygisa* powers, which flowed through her. She felt communion with the woods around them and the earth itself, and the moon seemed to shine brighter as Adam moved toward her.

He wore only jeans, and her fangs elongated at the sight of his muscular chest and the slight dusting of hair that disappeared beneath the waistband of his jeans. The tattoo on his bicep of a howling wolf stood out in stark relief against his lightly tanned skin. She'd spent a long time earlier in the day tracing that tattoo with her fingers and tongue, and she'd even considered getting one herself. Someday.

He curled his hand behind her neck and drew her to his mouth. "My beautiful mate," he whispered, his lips hovering over hers for only a heartbeat before he kissed her deeply.

She moaned into his mouth, her body sparking with electricity at his touch.

His free hand slid into the space between her top and skirt and found the small of her back, where he rested his warm hand and drew her against him. "You were amazing, love."

She smiled up at him. “I can’t believe how connected I feel to everything, to everyone.”

He cast his gaze skyward and she looked up, seeing that the moon was almost complete. “Are you ready, Cinder?”

“Lead the way, Alpha.”

He grinned sinfully. He knelt and lifted bundles of white ash tied with wire. He tossed the wood into the fire, causing sparks to lift into the air. Turning toward the pack, he raised his hand and a hush fell over the group. “I bring to the pack this night, Cinder Knight. I claim her as my mate and my alpha female. I vow to protect her and our future pups with my life.“

He turned to her and lifted his left hand, and she mirrored him. He’d already explained this part to her, and although earlier she’d been worried about her part, she wasn’t concerned anymore. She sliced through her wrist with her fangs, leaving twin furrows in her flesh. The blood welled and spilled down her arm as Adam did the same. Their fingers twined and they pressed their wounds together.

Adam’s voice was loud and clear as he spoke. “I give you your alpha female!”

The pack cheered as she and Adam unlocked their hands and raised them in the air for all to see. As she looked at their arms, she saw that although the blood remained, the wounds were already healed. The blood mixing and the remarkably fast healing was due to them being alpha mates, and after lowering her hand, she wiggled her fingers and looked at the scars.

Adam’s hands locked onto her hips and he kissed her gently. “They’re waiting for us, my mate.”

She blinked up at him and closed her eyes for a brief moment. She touched her connection to the pack and felt their happiness. It wasn’t just because she was a new and powerful form of protection for them, but because they were glad that Adam had found his mate and the pack finally had an alpha female.

The *lygisa* power that had been humming through her began to subside. She knew she could call it anytime she needed to, but it wouldn’t run hot like that all the time. As the power ebbed, she felt the pull of the full moon, and her bones and muscles began to ache.

She pressed her head to Adam’s chest. “Ah,” she gasped.

“I’ve got you, love. Let me help you.”

She lifted her head and pressed her lips to his.

* * * * *

Adam felt Cinder's entire body tremble as they kissed. She'd spent a good portion of the day distracted from the pains of her first shift thanks to their mate connection. But now that she was a full *lygisa* and officially a pack member, the time had lapsed and her shift was upon her.

He lowered them to their knees and turned her until her back was pressed to his chest. He could feel the pack's awareness, but he knew they weren't truly watching them, but waiting.

Cinder pressed her face into his neck, and her hands gripped his arms tightly as he held her. Her nails, slightly thicker and turning dark, broke through his skin, but he didn't care. Her fear at what was happening was tangible, and he knew distracting her was the key.

He laid his hand on her thigh and squeezed gently. He had to fight the wolf who wanted him to just push her forward and fuck her hard. This wasn't just about his own need to mate his female on the full moon, but was also about her comfort as she struggled with her shift.

She whimpered as he stroked up her warm thigh. His hand glided under her skit. She pushed her knees apart and he grinned. She might be nervous but she was eager too. He cupped her sex and her teeth bit into his neck.

He chuckled. "Anxious, sweetheart?"

"It hurts less when you touch me."

"I know. Mates soothe each other. It's not about the pack right now. It's about us. Give yourself to me."

"I'm yours, Adam. I think I've always been yours."

His wolf howled in happiness, and Adam slipped two fingers into her pussy. She arched her back, pressing her hips forward. She was so hot and wet. The heel of his palm pressed into her clit as he curled his fingers and began to stroke her. Her chest heaved as she panted, her breath fanning his neck as she gripped his arm. He held her close and fingered her, drawing her to the edge as swiftly as he could. He focused on their connection as mates and thought about how much he loved her, about how he'd never wanted anyone as much as he wanted her, and how he'd never been happier or more content in his life.

Her back arched further, and she screamed his name as her pussy

clamped down on his fingers when she came. He eased her forward, and she planted her hands on the ground, her fingers curling into the earth. Keeping his palm on her clit, he unzipped his jeans with his free hand and then lifted the back of her skirt. Her body, beautifully wet and bare, called to a deep part of him. He pushed into her, grinding his palm into her clit and feeling her pussy clench with each twist. Seated fully, he gripped her hips with both hands and straightened, lifting his head to the sky and seeing the moon. It was pure white, an almost ethereal glow surrounding it.

It was their moon, he realized. The first full moon of their mating, and the one he'd remember for the rest of his life. Cinder moaned softly, and he felt her ardor fading slightly as pain surfaced. He couldn't let that happen.

Turning his attention back to his mate, he gripped her hips tightly and began to move. Their bodies collided as he took her and felt the heat of her body as she responded to his claiming. He growled her name, and her pussy clenched him like a fist, making his vision darken for a brief moment of pure bliss. He increased the pace, holding her firmly. She stretched out her arms, lowering her body to the ground and wiggled her legs further apart. Her pussy tightened, and he tilted her hips with his hands, driving deeper into her core.

Swiveling his hips, he knew he'd hit her sweet spot when her hand curled and her now entirely black nails dug a deep trench into the ground. Growling, he fucked her hard and fast as his vision blurred and pleasure swamped him. She screamed and her body locked down on his, pulling him into his own climax.

Bending over her, he curled his arms around her as they came together. He saw the glow of their pleasure in his mind's eye and knew that Cinder had seen it too when she gasped. With a gentle push through their connection, they shared their pleasure with the pack, who greeted them with howls of acceptance and love.

"I love you, Cinder. I fucking love you so much." He kissed her neck and hugged her close.

"I love you, too. I –" She groaned and then her body jerked.

He pulled out of her and stroked his hands down her arms. "Don't fight it. Just let the shift come. It'll only hurt for a moment, and then you'll be free to hunt with me and our pack."

She groaned and rolled to her back. Her hands were curled under her chin, the thick claws clicking together. "I want to see the whole territory."

"What?"

Her back bowed and she cried out, her joints cracking. "I have to, for the *lygisa*. I have to know the land."

He pressed a kiss to her furry cheek. "Okay, love. Let me see your beautiful shift."

She rolled to her side and curled into a ball with a muffled sob. He wanted to help her, but there wasn't anything he could really do except be there for her. The first shift was always scary and difficult, but Cinder was at a disadvantage because she was older and hadn't grown up knowing what to expect.

He glanced around and saw that the whole pack was waiting for her to shift. He'd expected them to take the shared pleasure and go enjoy themselves, but they were waiting, watching to make sure she was okay.

Cinder rolled to her stomach as her bones cracked, the sound loud like fireworks. His wolf whined in sympathy as Cinder made small pained sounds while her body slowly transformed. She'd been a beautiful woman, but the creature before him was magnificent. Her fur was the color of spun gold and sparkled in the moonlight. Her eyes glowed like shiny gold coins.

She sat down on her rump and lifted a paw, looking at Adam plaintively.

He scrubbed at his eyes. He'd never thought a female's first shift would mean so much to him, but seeing Cinder struggle and come out on the other side victorious had touched him to the core.

He cupped her head and kissed her snout. "You're so beautiful. I'm one lucky male to have you as my mate."

She licked his chin and then pressed her nose to his throat with a soft growl. Her paw now rested on his thigh and her claws ripped through his jeans. He chuckled. "Let's get you undressed first and then I'll shift. We've got some territory to see."

The skirt had come off as she'd shifted, but the tank top was looped around her waist. He tugged it over her head and tossed it aside and then he stood, pushing his jeans down his hips. He shifted, quickly taking on his wolf form. His natural coloring was a stark contrast to her shimmering gold.

He found her sweet scent even more intoxicating in her shift as they scented each other. The pack had shifted at the same time that he had, and as he and Cinder walked away from the bonfire, they parted and let them lead.

The night passed quickly and the pack stayed out until dawn, which was the first time Adam had stayed out hunting that late on a full moon since he was a teenager. Keeping his promise to Cinder, he and the pack took her around the entire territory. As she trotted the edge of the territory, he saw that she was leaving something behind, a golden trail of glitter that faded as quickly as it was been shed from her fur. She was marking the territory through her *lygisa* power. His pride in his mate had no bounds.

When she'd marked the entire territory, they turned their attentions to the hunt. It was the best night of hunting he'd ever had. The game was plentiful, and Cinder was a fast learner. She first caught two rabbits, but instead of claiming them for herself, she gave them to two young females who had recently shifted. When she helped him take down a buck, she had shared the kill only with him, and he'd never seen anything sexier than his mate as she prowled toward the big creature.

When they finally reached the backyard as the sun began to rise, she shifted smoothly into her human form and sat down on the grass with a yawn.

"Tired, love?" he asked as he sat next to her. The pack shuffled into the yard, saying goodbye and heading to their homes.

"I am completely exhausted, but in such a good way."

"Do you feel different?"

"I feel the same but different, if that makes sense."

"Not remotely."

She slapped his shoulder with a laugh. "I mean, I know I'm still me, but there's this new part of me that feels like it's been there all along. The power is there in my mind, in the background. I know I can call it whenever I need it, the same as my wolf. The pack is my family now. I feel like I've known them forever."

He nuzzled her throat. "I feel the same way."

She hugged her arms around him with a sigh. "On the next full moon, I'll get to perform blessings. It will be like the vision we both shared before I came here, when I shifted in front of the fire with the pack."

He hummed in agreement. "We'll be ready."

She looked at his face, her eyes brimming with happiness. "Did you really like my shift?"

"You're beautiful."

“You’re pretty handsome yourself. You actually blend into the shadows, but I stick out like big gold thumb.”

He chuckled. “And there was the glitter thing.”

She made a face. “It wasn’t glitter. It was the *lygisa* power marking the territory.”

“Wolves usually just pee on stuff. That was glitter.”

“Adam,” she growled.

He tried not to grin, but he couldn’t help it. She was so cute when she was mad. A piece of fabric hit him in the face, and Cinder snorted a laugh. He glared at Solan who looked sorry he’d thrown it. Adam looked down to see a robe and a pair of shorts.

“I think the robe is for you, but if you’re going to be mad at me about the glitter thing, then maybe I’ll take the robe, and you can have the shorts.”

Seeming to be aware suddenly that she was naked, she covered her breasts with one arm and reached for the robe. He held it just out of reach.

“Adam!”

“Say you shoot glitter out of your butt, and you can have the robe.”

“I do not!”

She struggled to reach it but couldn’t.

“Say it. Say you have a glitter butt.”

“You can’t be serious!” She huffed.

“Alright,” he chuckled, “say you love me.”

Grinning, she nodded. “I love you. Even though you’re a total ass sometimes.”

“You know me so well, babe.” He laid the robe over her shoulders, and she slipped her arms into it as he stood and tugged on the shorts.

Solan, who had quickly disappeared, was replaced with Adam’s mom. “I made coffee.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I think we’re just going to bed. That is, if it’s okay with my mate.”

Cinder’s answer was a yawn. Adam lifted her into his arms and carried her into the house. She was asleep before he laid her down on their bed. It took only moments to divest them of their clothes, close the curtains, and lock the door before joining her under the covers

and pulling her close.

He would never have guessed that a trip to Lykos and seeing his mate would lead him to this place, where he held her close after a night of hunting, the pack completely content, and their territory safe. Cinder would keep the pack safe through her power, but Adam would keep *her* safe. He and his wolf silently vowed to be ever vigilant and protect her against anything and everything that might come.

Their meeting had awoken the wolf inside her and given her amazing power, but she'd given him much more in return. He'd spend the rest of his life making sure that she knew just how special she was to him.

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Chapter 17

Cinder settled into the chair behind the reception desk at the clinic. She hadn't been to work in a week. Adam didn't really want her to keep working, and she knew in reality that as alpha female, she really shouldn't work away from the pack, but the clinic needed a receptionist and she promised Dr. Whalen she'd train her replacement.

A chair scooted behind her, and Cinder moved to make room for Angie. They'd toured the facility already, and she was teaching her the position responsibilities. "Okay, so it's really a pretty simple job," she said. She explained the ten-line phone and the messaging system. "When Dr. Whalen's door is open, he's taking calls. Otherwise, he'll call whoever it is back, unless of course it's the leader of one of the were-groups or someone calling on his or her behalf. Do you know all the leaders?"

Angie shook her head.

"The head of the bear den is Adriel, and his mate's name is Filene." Cinder peeked over as Angie typed on the small keyboard attached to her iPad, where she took notes. "Then, you have Jesuit, the falcon prince, and his mate, Danika, and the male who shares her, the white lion prince Chance; Midas, the tiger king; and Tosh the dragon prince, and neither of them are mated. Of course I don't have to tell you about Mishka, the master of the vampire coven."

Angie giggled. "He's on the news a lot."

"Well, he's really photogenic."

"That's code for gorgeous, right? I mean, those golden eyes." Angie fanned herself exaggeratedly.

Cinder smiled. "If any of the big dogs, or their mates, call here and want to speak to Dr. Whalen, he will automatically take their call unless he's in surgery, and any pack members too. Everyone else has to leave a message or call back."

"Are you sad to leave your job?"

“Yes and no. There’s a lot to do in the pack. It’s been a while since you’ve had an alpha female who was actually a wolf, and I have a *ton* to learn. I miss the Wiccans, but we’re still in touch, and I won’t actually miss being up on the bluffs, naked, for the ceremonies.”

The front doors opened, and a young couple with a small, crying boy rushed in. The male was carrying the boy, who had a blood-soaked bandage on his arm. Cinder stood immediately, with Angie in tow, and she led the parents to one of the exam rooms while she sent Angie to get Dr. Whalen.

She sniffed and caught a scent of tiger.

“He was on the slide at the park, and he went too fast and slid off. He tried to grab hold of the slide, but his arm slipped underneath and was ripped open,” the father said as he set his son on the table but kept his arm protectively around him.

“Aw, poor sweetie,” Cinder said. As Dr. Whalen and two nurses rushed in, Cinder slipped out of the room to where Angie watched from the hallway. They walked back to the reception desk.

“My heart is pounding,” Angie said, as she took her seat.

“It’s like that here – really boring with the occasional emergency. You get used to it. Dr. Whalen is really great to work for, and because you’re a wolf, it will help put the supernatural patients at ease.”

“Could you heal that little boy?”

“No, because he’s a tiger and not a wolf. My *lygisa* won’t help him. If he were a wolf, though, yes.”

“Do any of the other groups have special shifter witches for themselves?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but I didn’t even know about *lygisa* until I turned into one.”

There was a creak as Solan, who had been sitting in the waiting room during Cinder’s shift straightened. He cracked his neck and walked to the desk. “I’m going to trade with Joe and patrol outside, Alpha.”

Cinder smiled. “Thanks, Solan.”

The two wolves traded places, and Solan walked briskly around the building as Joe settled into one of the chairs. Cinder’s phone beeped. She opened the drawer and pulled it from her purse.

“It’s from Arissa,” she said, reading the text from her Wiccan friend who was the beloved mate of a vampire named Brone. Keeping her voice low so Joe wouldn’t hear, she said, “Arissa said that you can

come to the club before sunset on Saturday night. She's going to send her friend Alli, a fallen angel, to bring you to the club and keep an extra eye on you."

"I've never met a fallen angel before, have you?"

"Arissa has a guard who's an angel too, his name is Darien. Because she works at the store two nights a month and has to be there before sunset, her mate sends her with four guards he chose and two dragons she is personally tied to. Two of her chosen guards are wolves, but they're not from our pack, and the other is a leopard."

Angie drummed her fingers on the desk. "I can't believe I'll actually get to meet vampires."

"Alli will be your special guard, and Arissa will make sure that you're well looked after. Don't wear *anything* white, because that's the color the humans who let the vampires feed on them wear. Also I am going to make you a protection ward just to be safe."

"What's that?"

"Just a little something extra to make sure you're going to come back to the pack in one piece."

Angie rubbed at her neck absently and stared out the front windows. "Adam wants me to go to a multi-pack gathering to try to find my mate. He even said we might host one in the spring." At Cinder's confused look, Angie clarified, "It's when single wolves from neighboring packs gather in one place to basically see if any of them are mates. Our pack hasn't ever hosted one."

"It makes you nervous?"

"Adam wants me mated. I think he doesn't want to worry about me anymore."

Cinder gave Angie a hug. "He'll always worry about you because you're his sister. I'm sure he just wants you to be happy."

Angie said nothing, but her risen brow was evidence that she didn't really believe the sunshine Cinder was trying to blow her direction. She didn't know what it was like to have a protective older brother, but she did know that Adam had good intentions when it came to his sister.

A young male entered the clinic, and their conversation stopped as he signed in. A discreet scent told her that he was a falcon.

"Dr. Whalen is dealing with an emergency. It could be a little while," Cinder told him.

“That’s okay,” he said, running his hand through his dark hair. “I need to get a physical for my job, and this is my only free night. I don’t mind waiting.”

Cinder told him to have a seat as she took the paperwork he handed to her. She let Angie fill it out for the doctor and make copies, and then they discussed the filing system. The evening passed quickly, and they weren’t able to pick up their conversation again, but Cinder was confident that Angie would be safe.

The following morning, Adam gave Cinder the oldest book of pack laws he had, and she sat on the couch in his office while he worked and read. In the old, old days, the pack had rules for everything, from how old pups should begin their hunting training to divvying up the patrol duties.

Adam sat down next to her after a few hours and kissed the top of her head. “How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. This book reads kind of like a diary with rules sprinkled in between. The alpha who wrote it gives reasons for all of the laws. Like this one, where the pups can’t begin training for hunting until they’re twelve, because a ten-year-old pup was chasing a rabbit and fell down an embankment and got hurt. The alpha said that he was too young to hunt and pay attention to his surroundings at the same time, so an age limit was made.”

Adam leaned over and looked at the open page. “Guidelines keep the pack safe. A lot of it is common sense, but there are always people who don’t have enough of it and need some help.”

She closed the book and set it aside, snuggling against him. “Our kids will shift, right?”

“We’re both shifters, why wouldn’t they?”

“I wasn’t born a wolf, though. My shift came through the power of my *lygisa.*”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re not a Wiccan anymore. You’re a shifter, and that means that what you are at the core of your being is a shifter. It’s my understanding that our sons will be alpha-powerful and, if we should have any daughters, they will become *lygisa* when they meet their mates.”

“If?”

He shrugged. “Male births are more prevalent than females. It has to do with how dominant our species is. For every ten males, only one female is born. Add in the number of non-shifters because of human mates, and that means even fewer females that have the capability of

creating shifting children."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that unless our pack suddenly starts having a lot of baby girls, the next generation is going to be fighting for eligible females. And *that* means eventually there won't be wolf shifters, because the males will look elsewhere for mates and pure wolves will become a thing of the past, even with our very long lives."

"That totally bums me out."

He leaned, pushing her flat to her back. "We can just have a lot of kids, sweetheart, and cross our fingers for females."

He nuzzled under her ear with a soft growl that sent shivers racing up and down her spine. She eased her hands under his shirt and ran them up his strong back. "I like the sound of that."

Their lips met, and her wolf howled in happiness. She put aside the thoughts of the future state of the pack and the idea that their sons might end up fighting over females and concentrated on her sexy mate.

She found it difficult to believe that only a month ago she'd thought she was happy, living a life with no real emotional entanglements. The truth was, though, that her happiness now was proof that she'd never really *known* what being truly happy was. She couldn't explain the soul-deep connection to Adam, but she knew that she'd never really been complete because a part of her heart had been missing and she hadn't even realized it.

Somewhere between him making her friends disappear and coming to save her, he'd shown her that being a mate meant being there in every capacity. It wasn't just about love; it was about commitment and loyalty. She had a lot to learn about being a wolf, but she had a great teacher who was currently slowly unzipping her jeans.

"I'm so lucky," she whispered, as he kissed the space just below her navel.

He gave her jeans an experimental tug. "I'm the lucky one, sweetheart."

She mentally declared it a tie as she stroked her fingers through his hair and bit her lip while he pulled her jeans down her legs. She'd found heaven in the arms of an alpha male, and she never wanted to be anywhere else.

The End

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